Introduction

Today, evangelicals often say that the Bible alone is our authority in faith and practice. It is claimed that tradition has no authority in our churches. We sometimes hear the Reformation described as a contest of Scripture versus tradition. That understanding is applied to our view of other Christian communions today, especially Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy: we condemn them because they acknowledge tradition as having a certain authority, and the result (we believe) has been that the teaching of Scripture has been obscured or distorted. In consequence, much modern evangelicalism, especially in the West, rejects the authority of Church and tradition; it tends to assume that the individual reader is capable of understanding the Bible without any human assistance. It is not surprising, therefore, that Orthodox and Roman Catholic writers accuse us of individualism, of believing that individual Christians can understand the Bible for themselves and thus they have no need of the church or of the tradition of Christian theology.

But I want us to think again about our attitude to tradition, because I believe that it is not the attitude of most of the 16th-century Reformers. What did the Reformers say about the authority of the Bible and its relationship to tradition? What was their understanding of the relationship of these to the Church? Why did they produce so many catechisms and confessions of faith? I am not a Reformation specialist, and do not claim originality for the exposition of 16th-century thought which appears here. Neither do I claim originality for much of the contemporary application, but I hope that it may provoke us to thought as we seek to listen to the Scriptures speaking in and to church life today. First of all, I shall attempt to clarify the meaning of the phrase sola Scriptura, and then I intend to examine the way in which Bible, Church and tradition were inter-related in the various 16th-century Western approaches to theology. Finally, I want to offer some pointers towards an understanding of how we should see these as related today.

At this point, we must define what we mean by “tradition”. Its basic reference is to something “handed down” from one generation to the next.
In this paper, we are thinking in terms of doctrines and practices which have been passed down within the Church. Two scholars, Heiko Oberman and Alister McGrath, have examined differing conceptions of the relationship between Scripture and tradition in Western theology during the Reformation era. However, the criticism of A. N. S. Lane should be noted, that Oberman’s analysis (which McGrath follows) omits the role of the Church and thus provides a distorted account of the relationship between Scripture and tradition. If we reflect on our own experience of church life, we see that it is within the Church that a “tradition” of sound teaching and church practice is handed down to us, by such means as preaching, teaching, and writing, as well as through simply living, working, and praying together as fellow-believers. Thus this paper does not merely examine the relationship between Scripture and tradition, but broadens the scope to include the Church, and also the work of the Holy Spirit.

Sola Scriptura?

The humanist movement had stressed the need for scholars to return to the writers of classical antiquity for intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual inspiration. For theologians, this meant a return to the Bible and to the earliest Christian writings, those of the Patristic period. Reformational theology took over this emphasis and developed it, providing a rationale for placing the Bible in a unique position of authority. For the Reformers, Scripture possessed an inherent authority as divinely-revealed, a truth which was brought home to the believer by the witness of the Holy Spirit; thus their approach differed from late-medieval Catholicism, which taught that the authority of the Scriptures was guaranteed by that of the Church. Accordingly, theology needed to return to Scripture as its primary source and supreme authority, since it was deviation from this, which had resulted in the errors prevalent in late-medieval Roman theology.

All other sources of Christian teaching were to be subject to correction in the light of Scripture, whether Fathers, Councils, theologians or popes. The Magisterial Reformers (those, such as Luther and Calvin, who retained the medieval concepts of a Christian society and a territorial church, and so believed that the state should aid the process of reform) still valued the theological tradition of the Church, often appealing to the earlier and more authentic tradition of the Fathers and the early Councils over against later distortions of the tradition seen in the medieval church; but they held that this tradition must be seen as always open to further reform (semper reformanda).

This concept of Scripture as supremely authoritative is what is meant by the Latin phrase sola Scriptura, one of the four famous slogans summarising Reformational theology, the others being sola gratia (by grace alone), sola fide (by faith alone), and solo Christo (through Christ alone). As far as I know, the phrase was not used by the Reformers...
themselves, but such a view of Scripture certainly underlay all the development which took place in particular doctrines, such as soteriology or ecclesiology. So we must stress that 16th-century Protestant thinking about Scripture reflects not only a particular concept of what Scripture is, but also a different way of doing theology from that of Rome or Orthodoxy.

Today, Evangelicals and their critics alike frequently misunderstand *sola Scriptura* as teaching that Scripture is the *only* authority for faith and practice. In fact, we have already explained that what Lutheran and Reformed theologians intended to say was that Scripture is the *supreme* authority, or, to use another word, the *final* authority. This is because it represented God speaking. There were other authorities – the teaching of the Fathers and the Councils, the Church, the ministry (and especially the preaching of the word by the minister), confessions of faith and so on. But all these authorities were seen as subordinate to Scripture; they were not God-breathed, as Scripture was, and they derived their authority from that of the word of God.

Related to the concept of Scripture as supreme authority is the concept of the sufficiency of Scripture. When Reformation theologians spoke of the “sufficiency” of Scripture, they meant that the Bible contained within it all that we need to know in order to be saved. Usually this was qualified by the assertion that some things were stated explicitly, while others, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, were necessary deductions from the teaching of Scripture. The *Thirty-nine Articles* of the Church of England (1571) asserted that:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation (Article 6).

Belief in the sufficiency of Scripture was a major reason for rejecting traditions devised by Roman Catholicism, such as pilgrimages and penances, which were made obligatory for the faithful.

It is only fair to note that many Catholic theologians had also affirmed that all we need to know for salvation was to be drawn from Scripture, but their attitude to the Church’s theological tradition was not fundamentally critical in the way that the Reformers’ attitude was. They did not, on the whole, contemplate the possibility that the tradition itself could have become distorted in the process of handing down, whereas the Reformers insisted that this was exactly what had happened and that the true Christian message had been obscured as a result.

To summarise: *sola Scriptura* did not require the total rejection of the authority of the Church or tradition, but it did mean that these were regarded as subject to correction in the light of Scripture, which contained everything necessary for salvation as the revelation of God. We shall now
look more closely at the relationship between Bible, Church and tradition, keeping in mind the role played by the Holy Spirit.

**Bible, Church and Tradition**

*Roman*

While the idea of an extra-Scriptural tradition whose content related to church practice, such as the form of the liturgy, originated very early in church history, later medieval theologians began to think of this tradition as also containing material relating to belief. Previously, Scripture had been seen as containing all Christian doctrine, but needing authoritative interpretation, which was provided by the Church as it drew upon the tradition. The content of tradition was seen as coinciding with that of Scripture: Scripture was sufficient in terms of its content, but required an authoritative interpreter, through whom the Holy Spirit gave understanding.

However, as doctrine developed, it became increasingly difficult to find scriptural support for everything. From the 14th century, a new approach appeared, which was used to justify those beliefs which could not claim scriptural legitimation, such as the immaculate conception of Mary (the belief that she was conceived without the stain of original sin so that Christ could be born of her without himself being tainted by original sin). Lane suggests that this view arose because the church’s practice in worship, the *lex orandi*, became the basis on which certain doctrines were put forward, the *lex credendi*. Thus the idea of the immaculate conception of Mary arose out of the Church’s worship practices, which represented part of the tradition. So now there were two sources for doctrine – written Scripture and unwritten tradition.

Another late-medieval approach regarded the Spirit speaking through the church as the ultimate authority, which validated both Scripture and the Church’s theological tradition. This view originated during the later medieval period, and it seems to have been the approach adopted by the Council of Trent. Trent asserted that the gospel was “the source both of all saving truth and rules of conduct.” These were contained in “the written books and the unwritten traditions.” Tradition was seen as having been dictated by Christ or the Spirit, just as Scripture had been, and handed down in the Church from one generation to the next. Both Scripture and tradition were handed down and authoritatively interpreted by the Church. The Church now for the first time defined the limits of the canon to include the deuto-canonical books, and also the text which alone possessed authority, the Vulgate, so it could be said that for Roman Catholics there was one ultimate source of doctrine: the Church, as guided by the Holy Spirit. The testimony of the Spirit was located not in the believer (as the Reformers taught), but in the Church’s teaching office. This is evident from...
the Profession of the Tridentine Faith (1564), which required Catholic teachers to accept the Church’s apostolic and ecclesiastical traditions, and to interpret Scripture according to the Church’s teaching.

As far as contemporary Catholic theology is concerned, we should note that Oberman sees a development of this attitude to tradition as emerging in 19th-century Catholicism, and underlying the doctrinal definitions of the First Vatican Council concerning papal infallibility and Pope Pius XII concerning the assumption of Mary. In it, the teaching of the church now, guided by the Spirit, is what is seen as authoritative, and earlier teaching is interpreted in the light of this. Such an approach has made it easier to give legitimacy to doctrinal developments such as papal infallibility (officially defined in 1870) or the bodily assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (defined in 1950).

Reformation

We have said that the Reformation represented a return to the supreme authority of Scripture. Well, how did the Reformers expound the New Testament references to tradition. We may say that they distinguished between two main types of tradition. For example, Calvin interprets the reference in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 to include doctrine, the doctrine which Paul had taught the Thessalonians. However, this was to be distinguished from the kind of tradition which the papists seek to enjoin upon men, which had no basis in Pauline teaching.

The first type of tradition was the tradition of apostolic doctrine, grounded on Scripture and summarized in the ecumenical creeds. This was accepted as possessing a legitimate, but subordinate, authority. There was only one source for doctrine – Scripture, “the only judge, rule, and norm”. However, within the Church there were reliable guides to help believers understand it correctly. At this point we must remind ourselves that the Reformers had been extensively influenced by humanist thought. Humanism sought to return to the ancient sources (ad fontes); for theologians, those sources were the Bible and the early Fathers, who were closest to the New Testament age and therefore more valuable than later theologians such as the schoolmen. The humanist movement had therefore encouraged the study of the writings of the early Fathers. The appeal to the Fathers and the Ecumenical Councils was an important element of the approach of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and the early Anglicans, but for a different reason. They appealed to the Fathers and the Councils not because of their antiquity, but because these were believed to be in agreement with the teaching of Scripture. As Calvin put it,

... although we hold that the Word of God alone lies beyond the sphere of our judgment, and that Fathers and Councils are of authority only in so far as they agree with the rule of the Word, we still give to Councils and Fathers such rank and honour as it is proper for them under Christ to hold.
Thus, for example, Zwingli and Calvin both accepted the three ancient creeds and the decisions of the first four Ecumenical Councils; the same would be true of 16th-century Anglican theology.

There was a polemical motive, as well as a theological one, behind this: the Reformers sought to demonstrate that their theology was in continuity with that of the Fathers, and that Rome had deviated, and was still deviating, from this tradition. The Reformers acknowledged that the Fathers could serve as guides to interpreting Scripture, but they also insisted that the Fathers themselves expected their teaching to be tested in the light of Scripture.

As well as accepting the ancient creeds, the Reformers also expressed their belief in such a tradition by producing their own confessions. Lutherans, Reformed, Presbyterians and Anglicans all produced confessions of faith – something which they would not have done if they had believed, as the Radicals did, that Scripture was the only authority. These confessions were seen as having a legitimate, though subordinate, authority, because they provided reliable summaries of apostolic doctrine. The *Formula of Concord* justified the acceptance of the *Augsburg Confession* as authoritative on the ground that this was comparable to the confession in ancient times of the Nicene Creed. Such confessions were attempts to meet the need for a universally accepted form of doctrine which could put an end to the bitter theological controversies which affected the various Protestant churches. For the Reformers, this kind of tradition was of value as a witness to the revelation given in Scripture and an aid to understanding it. It did not, in theory, provide the normative interpretation of Scripture any more than the teaching office of the contemporary church did, nor was it a source of additional truth; rather, it was a subordinate authority, a tool to help the contemporary church understand the Scriptures.

The second type of tradition was that which was believed to have been invented by the medieval church and which lacked Scriptural support. Into this category the Reformers placed such practices as pilgrimages and penances, and all non-Scriptural practices laid down as necessary to salvation. The *Augsburg Confession* explains that such traditions obscure the doctrine of salvation through faith, they obscure the commands of God, and they burden consciences. Similarly, Calvin explains that such traditions may represent practices contrary to Scripture, or unknown to Scripture (and thus no part of how God wishes to be worshipped), or they may be good practices insisted upon in a way which Scripture does not do. They displease God and often tend to obscure the teaching of Scripture. Evidently the Reformers went beyond the medieval theologians, because they were prepared to use Scripture to question aspects of the Church’s tradition: previously “apostolic Scripture” and “apostolic tradition” had been seen as harmonizing with each other, whatever the precise understanding of their relationship.
For the sake of completeness, we should also mention that the Reformers acknowledged that national churches might formulate their own traditions relating to such matters as the order of worship. Such traditions should be observed for the sake of good order. These, however, were justified by appeal to 1 Corinthians 14:40. For example, the Church of England asserted: “The Church hath power to decree rites and ceremonies” – but this resulted in a bitter dispute with the early Puritans, who condemned the insistence upon observing rites which were at best adiaphora, “things indifferent”.

How did the Reformers’ view work out in practice? If anyone was an individualist, it was the early Luther or Zwingli, confident in their belief that the individual reader could interpret Scripture themselves, a belief founded on the clarity of the Word of God and the illumination of the Spirit. They condemned the Catholic Church for not allowing this. It was said that Scripture is clear, self-interpreting, and therefore it should be possible to achieve unity of understanding. However, events proved that this was an unrealistic hope, as theological disagreements proved impossible to resolve. Furthermore, the initial emphasis on the clarity of Scripture was taken much further than the Reformers wished, as the Radicals attempted to get rid of all tradition and start over afresh in their understanding and application of Scripture (for instance, Karlstadt and Müntzer at Wittenberg in 1522). Luther was horrified by what he saw among the Radicals, and reacted by insisting on the need for qualified teachers, and authoritative statements of belief, which could guide readers in interpreting Scripture correctly.

Gradually, a tradition of acceptable interpretation was formed; the sufficiency of Scripture was seen as becoming a reality as the Spirit used the Church to open up the Scriptures. This tradition of correct interpretation was transmitted through such mechanisms as Zwingli’s Prophezei in Zürich. This was a conference which took place five times each week, at which a group of young theology students worked through the Bible in Latin, Greek and Hebrew to establish the correct exegesis; one of them would also preach a sermon in German. The congregation would have opportunity to comment on the preacher’s handling of the text.

This tradition was marked by an attempt to balance the Spirit’s work in the individual with his work in the Church. To both Sadolet and the Spiritualists, Calvin responded that the Spirit must never be divorced from the word. The Word tested Spiritualist claims to inward inspiration, and Catholic claims about the teaching authority of the Church. Experience and the Church must be subject to question; we dare not identify the voice of the Spirit with either, although we acknowledge that he speaks through both.

Authoritative guides to the interpretation of Scripture also began to appear, in the form of commentaries, confessions and catechisms, as well as books such as Calvin’s Institutes, which were intended as a handbook to help readers to understand the Scriptures (functioning rather like the
second-century *regula fidei*). Great stress was laid on the authoritative interpretation of Scripture offered by the church in the form of its creeds and catechisms, and the preaching of its ministers. The church and its ministers were expected to expound and uphold the doctrinal standards of the tradition to which it belonged.\(^{23}\) It is interesting to see how “Dr. Luther” came to be venerated by later Lutheran scholars and confessions, and his views regarded as settling controversy. This phenomenon was more pronounced in Lutheran circles than in Reformed ones, perhaps because Luther stood out from his colleagues in a way that Calvin did not, but also because the practice of testing every tradition by Scripture was more firmly entrenched, and led to more radical change, in Reformed circles (though the Anabaptists believed that even there it was limited).

By now, we are probably thinking that there is a tension in the Reformers’ thought between the concept of Scripture as the final authority and the authority which in practice was accorded to confessions of faith. The normative status of confessions of faith was harmonised with the *sola Scriptura* principle by positing two types of norm for the Church’s belief: Scripture was the *norma normans*, the rule by which all other authorities were measured; confessions were *norma normata*, to be measured against Scripture. In theory, these were functioning merely as aids to the understanding of Scripture, and were subject to correction in the light of it. However, in practice, the creeds and confessions functioned as authoritative interpreters of Scripture in a similar manner to tradition in Catholicism. Because they were far more detailed than early creeds, they tended to define the faith more narrowly, and perhaps to exercise a deadening effect upon the hermeneutical process.

*Radical*

It is commonly asserted that for most Radical leaders (and here our focus is on the “Evangelical Radicals”, also known as Anabaptists), tradition had no value as a guide to our understanding of Scripture. Tradition was often regarded not as an authority but as an evidence of decline from the teaching of the New Testament. (Presumably separation from Christendom entailed separation from its tradition, though I do not know how far this was developed in any explicit way.) However, we shall see that this is a one-sided picture, and that even the Anabaptists eventually began to work with some kind of concept of tradition.

The radicals had no quarrel with the Magisterial belief in Scripture as supreme authority, but their complaint was that the Reformers had not acted consistently with belief in this principle. Indeed, according to the radicals, the Reformers were often more bound by tradition than they realised. Tradition was hindering the Reformers from being consistent with their declared submission to Scripture as the supreme authority. Another problem was the Magisterial affirmation of the concept of “Christendom”, in which a territorial church was upheld by the state; in practice, the state
often sought greater power over the church, as was the case in Zürich during the introduction of reform in the early 1520s, where the city council seems to have seen itself as the final authority for determining the correct interpretation of Scripture. Reformers would (perhaps unconsciously) have tried to interpret and apply Scripture in a way that was both acceptable to the civil authorities and realistic in that it could be acted upon without overturning the fabric of society.

Infant baptism was a practice which frequently came under radical fire in this respect, and the desperate attempts of theologians to offer a biblical justification for the practice only served to demonstrate to the radicals how tradition-bound the Reformers still were. Luther acknowledged that he retained infant baptism on the basis of tradition, but Calvin sought to provide it with a Scriptural basis, though it has been pointed out that the attempt to base on Scripture a practice which did not grow up until several centuries after the Scriptures were written, could never be convincing.

Many early Anabaptist leaders had been influenced by humanism. So they recognized the importance of returning to the Scriptures as the best source for understanding what Christians should believe and how they should live. What mattered to them was not interpreting Scripture but obeying it; this has been described as a “hermeneutic of obedience”. And obeying Scripture meant imitating Christ. This being so, the humblest peasant might possess greater insight into Scripture than the most highly-trained theologian.

However, Alister McGrath\textsuperscript{24} goes too far in asserting that the Radicals’ approach “unquestionably” placed the judgement of the individual over that of the church. It is true that some more individualistic Radicals felt free to reject traditional interpretations of Scripture, either because the Spirit showed them something different or because these interpretations were seen as contrary to reason. Thus the anti-Trinitarians emerged, committed to doctrines such as justification by faith, but rejecting the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. Nevertheless, the majority of Anabaptists used a hermeneutic which stressed that interpreting the Scriptures is something which believers do together, and that it is in such a context that the Spirit gives light. This was one of the main differences between them and the Spiritualists\textsuperscript{25}, and is in line with the corporate nature of Anabaptist spirituality as a whole, other manifestations of this including the discipling of new believers, the requirement that all in the fellowship be open to correction by others, and the practice of sharing one’s goods with those in need.\textsuperscript{26}

In principle, then, Anabaptist hermeneutics were to be done in the setting of the community of believers: preaching was complemented by group discussion, questions and answers, and even charismatic prophesying; any member of the congregation was free to contribute, although the contributions of certain brethren were recognized as carrying more weight, because of their godly example and their knowledge of the Scriptures: "For congregational hermeneutics, there is no requirement that
every contribution carry the same weight, but every contribution must be weighed.\textsuperscript{27} Acceptable interpretations could be reached by various means, which were not mutually exclusive: the Spirit speaking through an individual, the pronouncements of those recognised as exercising an apostolic or prophetic ministry, the guidance of local leaders, and the consensus of the congregation as a whole.\textsuperscript{28}

And once the body had reached an understanding, that understanding was looked upon as authoritative; thus the \textit{Schleitheim Articles}, emerging from a conference in 1527 which sought unity on a range of contentious issues, asserted that any not walking according to the conclusions laid down should not be allowed into membership. We can see, then, that the consensus of the faithful (at local and inter-congregational levels) served as a guide in interpreting Scripture. When such an approach is adopted, the result is that over time a new tradition is built up, even in traditions which reject the idea of tradition. This is exactly what happened among many Radical groupings, as may be inferred from the practice among the Hutterites, for instance, of reading sermons from the movement’s first century (and in the original high German as well) rather than preaching new ones.

One weakness of Radical approaches was that, in spite of the existence of a vigorous “spiritualist” tradition, emphasizing the role of the Spirit in inward illumination, often at the expense of the outward word, church and sacraments, mainstream Anabaptists did not really explain what it meant to rely on the Spirit in the process of interpreting Scripture.\textsuperscript{29} The role of the Spirit seems to have been understood as relating more to the inward disposition of the interpreter(s), thus linking with the Anabaptist emphasis on a hermeneutic of obedience.

It also appears that some Anabaptists did make explicit use of credal statements. Research has demonstrated that Hubmaier and other South German Anabaptists followed Catholic and Protestant custom in making extensive catechetical use of the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed.\textsuperscript{30} The Hutterite leader Peter Ridemann wrote an influential \textit{Confession of Faith} (1540), which included a lengthy exposition of the Apostles’ Creed. Furthermore, detailed confessions of faith began to be produced by Dutch Mennonites from the late 16th century, an indication of a developing sense that their tradition needed to be safeguarded in this way against the incursion of error. All this means that the widespread modern understanding of Anabaptism as essentially non-credal must be questioned; such an interpretation may say more about its contemporary advocates than about the 16th-century movement.\textsuperscript{31} Indeed, one Anabaptist scholar goes so far as to suggest that Anabaptist theological method was not fundamentally different from that of mainstream Protestants or Catholics: whilst they broke with the existing institutional church, that need not imply a rejection in principle of the legitimacy of tradition and a sense of history. All that they were doing was to redefine what counted as legitimate tradition, as a result of redefining the nature of the church.\textsuperscript{32} This
interpretation may be going too far, and much of Dyck’s evidence is taken from the 17th and 18th centuries; however, it does represent a necessary caution against the tendency to assume that Anabaptist theological method was totally different from that on which many early leaders had been nurtured. This evidence is particularly significant for those of us who stand in the “Believers’ Church” tradition today.

**Bible, Church and Tradition Today**

By this stage, we may be asking whether it is ever possible to achieve a tradition-less approach to Scripture. Indeed, is it right to attempt to do so? Looking at the impact of the stream of biblical scholarship which has consciously cut loose from traditional interpretation of Scripture, we may fairly question whether it is. Claiming to have no tradition can itself become a tradition, one whose effects may be the more restrictive for being unacknowledged.

Confessions of faith may not be used in our churches, but are we guided by accepted, and often unwritten, ways of interpreting Scripture? Even if we claim to reject tradition or human creeds, it is still likely that there is in our churches an accepted way of interpreting the Scriptures. For example, I remember preaching on the parable of the Prodigal Son on one occasion, and being told by a deacon afterwards that what I had said was very interesting, but that it was not the accepted Strict Baptist interpretation. And what about the set ways of doing things which every local church has? Often unwritten, new members and visiting preachers are nevertheless expected to conform to these or face congregational disapproval. It seems to me that we would do well to acknowledge that such traditions do exist, and that they play a powerful role in church life. Bringing them to the light in this way is the first step in the process of examining them in the light of divine revelation. Some may need to be abandoned; but I think that many would prove on examination to be worthy of retention, always provided that they are continually open to review as circumstances change and as our understanding of Scripture grows.

We would agree that it is mistaken to do theology without reference to the Scriptures, the work of the Holy Spirit, or the church situation in which God has placed us. (That is a major problem with the dominant model of doing theology in the West — that it pays insufficient attention either to the church context or the Spirit’s illumination.) In the same way, I do not think that it is realistic to attempt to do theology without reference to tradition. We may see the first-century church as a model for us, but we must beware of ignoring the twenty centuries which separate the two. When Protestants have tried to do this, they have often repeated the heresies which appeared during the early Christian centuries. This happened among the 16th-century Radicals; it also happened among 17th-century English Baptists and 19th-century Brethren. Evangelicals frequently adopt a negative attitude toward
tradition, but it may help if we try to view tradition as the voice of those through whom the Spirit has worked in previous generations to bring glory to Christ and understanding of the divine revelation. We recognise those through whom he works today, so this should be possible for us.

So we have four elements: Scripture, tradition, the contemporary church, and the Holy Spirit. We have seen how these related in the Reformation era; but the challenge is for us to relate them to each other in our ministry and Christian living today. Let me suggest one way of doing this.

Scripture possesses supreme authority because it alone can be described as God-breathed. The canon of Scripture was recognised by the early church, the text of Scripture has been handed down by the church through the centuries, and the message of Scripture is to be expounded by those so gifted in the church today. In all these, the Holy Spirit is at work, the same Spirit who inspired the original writings; but Scripture stands above the Church because it is the word of God. Individuals and the Church alike stand under the Bible, which is the final authority in all matters of Christian faith and practice.

How does the Spirit work to illuminate the Scriptures? Here we need to strike a balance. On the one hand, examination of the New Testament indicates that certain individuals were recognized as gifted by the Holy Spirit in teaching (cf. Ephesians 4:11). On the other hand, learning took place in a context which allowed multiple contributions, questions and so on (cf. 1 Corinthians 14); it is possible for the Spirit, who blows where he wills, to use any individual to give light on the word, just as he is able to illuminate the individual reading the Scriptures at home. Therefore, it seems that a judicious use of congregational hermeneutics is appropriate today, but without following the Anabaptists in their tendency to reject the work of biblical scholars or the tradition handed down to us from previous generations.

How might we practice congregational hermeneutics? It would seem that one potential model is already a prominent part of Baptist church life in Romania: I refer to the Sunday morning Bible Study, in which some churches allow congregational input, although the study is led from the front. A congregation which is taught how to handle the Scriptures wisely (and that need not involve the ability to understand technical minutiae or the ability to use multitudes of reference books) should be well able to make good use of such an opportunity. The challenge may be to relate what is done in that setting to what happens in the service which follows, and to the sermons preached there.

To balance this congregational approach, we must also recognize that one of the gifts of the ascended Christ to his church is the teacher (Calvin went so far as to institute this as a separate office in his church order). This should affect our approach in two ways. Firstly, the health of our churches suffers if we reject one of the gifts which are given for our building up. Secondly, the teacher functions as part of the church; this is not primarily a
matter of academic ability, but of spiritual gifting (although the two must never be separated, we must put them in the right order) – a point which has often been neglected in Western theological and exegetical methodology.

Perhaps all I can do here is to raise questions rather than offer definitive answers; you must relate these questions to your situation. Nevertheless, I believe that with prayer and thought along the lines I have indicated, it should be possible for us to help our congregations grow in their ability to understand, apply and live out the Scriptures, to the glory of God.

Notes


3 Cf. the Lutheran Smalkald Articles (1537), III.xv.


5 Lane, “Scripture, Tradition and Church”, 40-2.

6 There has been considerable ecumenical debate during the last 50 years about the correct interpretation of Trent’s teaching on Scripture and Tradition; for a summary of this debate, see A. N. S. Lane, “Sola Scriptura? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan”, in P. E. Satterthwaite & D. F. Wright (eds), A Pathway into the Holy Scripture (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 316-17.

7 Decree concerning the Canonical Scriptures (1546).

8 Also known as the “Creed of the Council of Trent” or the “Creed of Pope Pius IV”.


11 Gallusian Confession (1559), Art. V; Heidelberg Catechism (1563) Q.23; Second Helvetic Confe
cession (1566), chapter XVII; Thirty-nine Articles, Art. VIII; Formula of Concord (1577), “Epitome”, 2.


13 Reply to Sadoletto (1539).

14 Cf. Augsburg Confession (1530), Art. XXII.

15 Cf. Second Helvetic Confession, chapter II.

16 Formula of Concord, “Solid Declaration”.

17 Augsburg Confession, II.v.


19 Cameron, The European Reformation, 89.


21 Thirty-nine Articles, Art. XX.

22 Zwingli’s strong emphasis on the need to understand the original languages led one Anabaptist, the former priest and trained theologian Balthasar Hübmaier, to complain with some justification that the Reformers had replaced the papacy with the rule of trained scholars.


24 McGrath, Reformation Thought, 146.


26 Ibid. 157.

Cf. Snyder-Penner, 319-320, 335.