

TRADITIONALISM
Part 1 of 2: Traditionalism and *Sola Scriptura*;
and Evangelical Traditionalism

by [John M. Frame](#)

One of the largest problems today in Evangelical and Reformed theology is the tendency toward traditionalism. I hope in this paper to take some steps toward analyzing this danger and commending its antidote, the Reformation doctrine of *sola Scriptura*.¹

Traditionalism and *Sola Scriptura*

Traditionalism is hard to define. It is right and proper to revere tradition, since God has raised up many teachers for his church over the years who, through their writings, continue to speak to us. A teacher in the church does not lose his authority after he dies. So God does intend for us to learn from teachers of the past, or, in other words, from tradition. On the other hand, the Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura* teaches us to emulate the Reformers in testing every human tradition, even the teachings of the church's most respected teachers, by the Word of God.

"Traditionalism" exists where *sola Scriptura* is violated, either by adding to or subtracting from God's Word ([Deut 4:2](#)). To subtract from the Word is to contradict or neglect its teaching. To add to it is to give to human teaching the kind of authority which belongs to God's Word alone ([Isa 29:13-14](#); [Matt 15:8-9](#)). Too great a reverence for tradition can lead to both errors.

In this article, I will focus on one way in which Evangelical and Reformed theologians are tempted to add to the Word of God: by seeking to resolve substantive theological issues by reference to historical traditions, without searching the Scriptures.

This error in theological method has, of course, been characteristic of Roman Catholic theology since long before the Reformation, and it was one of the Reformers' chief complaints against the Roman magisterium. It has also been characteristic of the liberal

¹ I have previously addressed these issues in my books *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) and *Contemporary Worship Music* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1997), especially Appendix 2 of the latter, "In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism," published also in longer form in *Westminster Theological Journal* 59:2 (Fall, 1997), 269-318, with responses by Richard Muller and David Wells. I also participated in an e-mail debate on this and other subjects with Darryl Hart in early 1998. A ZIP-format file of that debate may still be available from Andy Webb [email deleted].

theology of the last several centuries. For liberal theology is, almost by definition, the attempt to present the Christian message on some basis other than that of the infallible authority of Scripture.² Liberals use Scripture in their theological work, to be sure. But they reserve the right to disagree with it. So, in the final analysis they are on their own, basing their thought on human wisdom, human tradition.

How do liberals reach theological conclusions without appealing to the ultimate authority of Scripture? It isn't easy. But essentially, the liberal appeals to Christian tradition. With some exceptions, liberals do not like to present their work as mere speculation. They want to be recognized as Christian teachers, as members of the historic theological community. So they seek to position themselves within the church's theological tradition. I shall mention three ways in which they do this, using my own nomenclature:

1. *Identification*: choosing a historical or contemporary movement and endorsing it, allowing it to set standards of truth.
2. *Antithesis*: choosing a historical movement and opposing it, making it into a paradigm case of error. (Thus the main stream of liberal theology has typically demonized especially modern "fundamentalism" and the post-Reformation protestant theologians.)
3. *Triangulation*: Identifying two or more historical movements thought to be of some value, identifying weaknesses in these movements, and defining a new position which supposedly overcomes these weaknesses.³

When I studied at Yale in the mid-1960s, the courses labelled "systematic theology" were actually courses in the history of liberal theology since Schleiermacher. (Theology before Schleiermacher was called "history of doctrine.") Whatever movement the professor espoused (process theology, narrative theology, Kierkegaardian individualism, etc.) provided the "identification." Fundamentalism or Protestant orthodoxy provided the "antithesis." Triangulation was the method urged upon the students for developing their own theological perspectives. Barth had too much transcendence, Bultmann too much immanence; so the students were encouraged to go "beyond" both, to a position which did justice to the insights of Barth and Bultmann, without going to such indefensible extremes. Doing their own triangulating, some professors pointed us to the "futuristic" theologies of Moltmann, Gutierrez, and Pannenberg, in which the future provides transcendence and the concrete movement of history provides immanence. But more importantly, students were urged to go their own way, triangulating on whatever movements inspired them, to develop their own

² By "liberal" I refer to the whole tradition from enlightenment rationalism to the present which currently dominates mainstream theological discussion and ministerial training in the large denominations. It includes, not only the "older liberalism" of Ritschl and Harnack, but also neo-orthodoxy, existential theology, secular theology, liberation theology, post-liberalism, and other movements.

³ These three methods form a Hegelian triad of sorts.

distinctive brands of theology.

Evangelical Traditionalism

Evangelical scholars often study in liberal institutions, and so it is not surprising that the methods of identification, antithesis, and triangulation have also entered Evangelical theology, sometimes alongside a genuine concern for *sola Scriptura*. There is, of course, nothing wrong with the three methods themselves as long as Scripture supplies the norms for evaluation. But using them without biblical norms (as in the examples of my Yale experience) amounts to theological autonomy and the loss of *sola Scriptura*.

Most theologians in the Evangelical tradition do confess *sola Scriptura*. But alongside that confession has arisen an increasing emphasis on tradition.

Thirty years ago, the best-known Evangelical scholars were apologists, biblical scholars, and systematic theologians (Clark, Henry, Carnell, Van Til, Bruce, Packer⁴). Today, Evangelical academic leaders are largely in the field of historical theology, or they are systematic theologians who greatly emphasize church history: Armstrong, Bloesch, Godfrey, Grenz, Hart, Horton, Marsden, McGrath, Muller, Noll, Oden, Wells, et al.⁵

In addition, we should note (1) the movement toward a renewed confessionalism led by the Association of Confessing Evangelicals, and (2) recent "conversions" of people of Evangelical background to communions giving more stress to the historic traditions of the church: Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy.

What lies behind these trends? An adequate answer to that question would probably require historians of the caliber of the men listed above. But here are a few suggestions that make some sense to me.⁶

1. Evangelical Exposure to Liberal Theological Methods

The academic stars of Evangelicalism are chosen, to a great extent, by the secularist-liberal academic establishment. Those whose scholarship is most admired among Evangelicals are those who have earned degrees and/or obtained appointments at outstanding secular universities. The secular academic establishment does not, of

⁴ Bruce and Packer were, of course, historians too. But during the 1960s they were better known for biblical scholarship and systematic theology, respectively.

⁵ Let me make clear my profound respect for these men and the quality of scholarship they have maintained. My criticisms of evangelical historicism, which may in part apply to some of these brothers, is not intended in the least to dishonor them or to belittle their achievements.

⁶ For those familiar with my "perspectives," the following three suggestions can be classified as situational, normative, and existential, respectively.

course, reward theologians who derive their conclusions from the divine, infallible authority of Scripture. But gifted Evangelicals can do well in the secular environment if they write their dissertations and phrase their conclusions in *historical* terms. One could not, for example, expect Oxford University to grant a Ph.D. to a dissertation defending biblical inerrancy. But it is not too hard to imagine such a degree being given for a thesis on the *history* of the doctrine of inerrancy, in which the writer's own evaluations are couched in the modes of identification⁷, antithesis, and triangulation.

If an Evangelical doctoral candidate has a bias in favor of sixteenth-century theology instead of nineteenth or twentieth, the secular establishment will not normally consider that attitude any sort of challenge, as long as in other respects the candidate respects the methods and standards approved by the establishment. Indeed, the candidate's advisors and readers may regard his bias as a quaint sort of antiquarianism, a charming affectation appropriate to the academic vocation.

So it has been natural for Evangelicals to focus on historical studies and methods, even when seeking to give some normative support to Evangelical distinctives.

That is not wrong in my estimation. It does not necessarily entail compromise. One does what one can do in such a situation. It has been going on a long time. I recall that when the Reformed scholar John H. Gerstner taught at the liberal Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, he held the title Professor of Church History, though in my estimation most of his interests were better classified as systematic theology. Holding his conservative beliefs, he was not invited to teach systematic theology, but he regularly taught courses in the "history of" various doctrines: biblical authority, justification, and so on. Gerstner had a tremendous influence; R. C. Sproul attributes his Ligonier Ministries to Gerstner's theological inspiration.

Though the emphasis on history can certainly be justified by the inherent value of historical studies and by the pragmatics of Evangelicalism's marginal position in the academic world, there is a downside. Scholars can⁸ get into the habit of using the methods of identification, antithesis, and triangulation, without taking adequate care to find biblical standards of evaluation.⁹

⁷ Of course, in such a context one must identify with a movement that has the approval of the liberal establishment.

⁸ I am not saying, of course, that study in liberal institutions leads necessarily to these distortions. Some students have resisted these influences successfully, J. Gresham Machen being a conspicuous example. But fallen human nature being what it is, it is not surprising that some have succumbed to these temptations.

⁹ I have used the example of David Wells in my "In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism," cited above. See also my comments on Richard Muller, "Muller on Theology," Westminster Theological Journal 56:1 (Spring, 1994), 133-51. See also comments on Hart, Marva Dawn, and others in my Contemporary Worship Music.

a) *Identification*: They may sometimes attach themselves to some movement in the past or present that they come to regard virtually as a standard of truth.¹⁰ In Reformed circles, this tendency leads to a fervent traditionalism, in which, not only the Confessions, but also the extra-confessional practices of the Reformed tradition, in areas such as worship, evangelism, pastoral care, are placed beyond question. In an atmosphere of such traditionalism, it is not possible to consider further reform, beyond that accomplished in the reformation period itself. There is no continuing reformation of the church's standards and practices by comparing them with Scripture. Thus there is no way in which new practices, addressing needs of the present time, can be considered or evaluated theologically. This is ironic, because one of the most basic convictions of the Reformed tradition itself is *sola Scriptura* which mandates continuing reformation, *semper reformanda*. At this point, Reformed traditionalism is profoundly anti-traditional.

In other circles influenced by Evangelicalism, there is an identification with Evangelical feminism. Paul K. Jewett's *The Ordination of Women*¹¹ is so strongly governed by feminist assumptions that even the authority of the apostle Paul comes under question.

b) *Antithesis*: Such scholars tend also to focus on other movements which serve as paradigms of error. In Reformed circles, these movements usually include Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, the charismatic movement, dispensationalism, and such contemporary movements as liberalism, Marxism, feminism, and "pop culture." I am not an advocate of any of these movements, and I see them as deeply flawed. But I think it is wrong to make them *paradigms* of error, so that nothing true or good can ever be found in any of them. Our world is fallen, but it is also the object of God's common and special grace. Therefore, both good and bad are to be found in all people and social institutions.¹²

¹⁰ Hart, in the debate cited earlier, describes Reformed tradition as a kind of "presupposition," in the Van Tillian sense of that term. Elsewhere in the debate, he does claim belief in *sola Scriptura*, but not very credibly in view of his enormous reverence for tradition. He expresses terror of ever departing from Reformed tradition in any respect, comparing that to the terror Luther experienced at the prospect of breaking fellowship with the Roman Church.

¹¹ Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980. His later systematic theological work, *God, Creation, and Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) also affirms the feminist movement and adopts sexual egalitarianism as one of its main structural motives. See pp. 13-14, 322-325, and the sermons included in the book of the Rev. Dr. Marguerite Schuster.

¹² I do hold a Van Tillian view of antithesis between the church and the world, between truth and error. But Van Til himself recognized the importance of common grace, and he spoke of a "mixture of truth and error" in the thought of unbelievers. He also recognized that antithesis in the proper biblical sense requires definition on biblical standards, not on the basis of our autonomous evaluations of historical movements. See my *Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995), especially chapter 15.

But one sometimes gets the impression in reading Evangelical theology that it is wrong to find any good in such movements, or even to formulate our own positions in ways that "blunt our testimony" against these movements. It is almost as though a theology cannot be genuinely Reformed unless it is "set over against" these other movements in the sharpest way.

At its worst, this method becomes a *via negativa*: we attempt to define the truth by looking at a movement we don't like and defining our own position to be the opposite of that. Thus, ironically, the false movement becomes, by logical inversion, a standard of Christian truth. Antithesis becomes a perverse form of natural theology. But surely this is wrong. We should define the Christian message positively, from the clear revelation of God's Word. I consider the *via negativa* to be fatal to the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*.

c) *Triangulation*: Or, Evangelical scholars trained in the methods of liberal theology may seek to develop new and fresh forms of Evangelicalism by the method of triangulation. I see some evidence of this in Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson, *Twentieth-Century Theology*,¹³ in which everything turns on the concepts of transcendence and immanence, and the challenge to Evangelicals is to seek a "balance" that Kant, Barth, Tillich and others have failed to achieve. My response: don't seek to balance the profoundly false notions of transcendence and immanence found in liberal theology, but go back to the Bible.

I also believe that the "open theism" of Pinnock, Rice, Basinger and others is essentially a triangulation between traditional Arminianism and process theology. Arminianism doesn't adequately safeguard its own concept of free will, because of its affirmation of divine foreknowledge. Process theology overcomes this problem by denying foreknowledge; but its god is so immanent that it is not clearly distinct from the world. Ergo, open theism: God is transcendent, but does not have complete knowledge of the future. It would have been better, in my view, for Pinnock and the others to have looked harder at Scripture.¹⁴ A more careful look at the Bible would have led them to question the heart of their system: the libertarian view of human free will.

2. Evangelical Weariness Over the Inerrancy Debate

The "battle for the Bible" has virtually defined American Evangelicalism from the time of B. B. Warfield until very recently. In the early days of that period, the battle was against the liberals, who defined themselves, in effect, as being opposed to biblical inerrancy. In the mid-1960s, however, it became evident that some within the Evangelical tradition also found it difficult to affirm biblical inerrancy, and the battle raged within the

¹³ Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992.

¹⁴ I realize that their writings do include exegetical arguments, but I find these quite implausible. Ironically, it seems to me that their exegesis falls into the error that they regularly attribute to Calvinists: their exegetical conclusions are governed by their dogmatics.

Evangelical movement as well as with those outside. The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy held conferences and published a great many writings on the subject, before it disbanded. It remains to be seen where this discussion has led the Evangelical movement.

Since inerrancy was often mentioned as the doctrine that defined Evangelicalism over against its Protestant liberal rivals, the questioning of inerrancy within Evangelicalism led to a profound identity crisis. The "limited" or "partial" inerrantists were not liberals; they were supernaturalists who held to the traditional "fundamentals" (virgin birth, miracles, blood atonement, physical Resurrection, second coming) *except for* biblical inerrancy. But with such a deep rift on a central matter, how was the Evangelical family to stay together?

There were different answers to this question among Evangelicals. Some inerrantists simply read their opponents out of the movement. Others tried to recognize the remaining common ground, along with the differences. Questions of inerrancy sometimes, at least, resolved into questions of interpretation (e.g., the question of whether [Genesis 1](#) teaches a temporal sequence of divine creation in 24-hour days), and increasing realization of that fact led some on either side to see the issue as something other than black-and-white. And there was a *rapprochement* from the far side as well: scholars from the liberal tradition were taking the Bible more seriously and coming to more conservative conclusions on historical and dogmatic questions. Thus the gap between Evangelicals and liberals narrowed, appearing in some cases to be a continuum rather than an antithesis.

With these developments came a weariness with the inerrancy debate. Today there is far less interest, even among those committed to a strong view of inerrancy, in proving the Bible right about every matter of history, geography, science, than there was twenty years ago. Further, some have sensed a need for a common-ground methodology that will enable inerrantists, limited-inerrancy Evangelicals, and liberals to work together without constantly arguing the detailed accuracy of the biblical texts.

That methodology is essentially the methodology of historical scholarship. When Wolfhart Pannenberg, coming from the liberal tradition, declared the necessity of verifying all theological statements by (religiously neutral) historical scholarship, many Evangelicals applauded.¹⁵ They perceived this dictum as vindicating their evidential apologetic. And in effect, many Evangelicals of different convictions about inerrancy, and many liberals of different stripes, are now working together to develop theology on this model.

¹⁵ For reasons *not* to applaud religious neutrality in apologetics, history, and theology, see my *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1994) and *Cornelius Van Til*, cited above. See also the above mentioned articles "Muller on Theology" and "In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism." By "religiously neutral" I mean scholarship in which the ultimate standards of truth are found somewhere other than Scripture

But a theology based on religiously neutral historical scholarship must find its standards of truth elsewhere than Scripture. And so the methods of this kind of theology tend to be the methods of identity, antithesis, and triangulation discussed earlier in this paper, rather than any direct and detailed appeal to biblical texts.

3. Evangelical Shame Over Past Parochialism

Evangelicals have in this century often been called to re-examine themselves. Carl Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of American Fundamentalism*¹⁶ chastised Evangelicals for their poor scholarship and their withdrawal from issues of social justice. The "new" Evangelicalism of the postwar period tried to reconstruct fundamentalism along the lines suggested by Henry and others. In the debate over inerrancy around 1967-1990, again the very nature of Evangelicalism was up for discussion.

Meanwhile, other Evangelicals found their tradition wanting in its lack of any sense of the great traditions of the church. Evangelicalism, it seemed, was not well-connected to the roots of Christendom: the church fathers, Augustine, the fathers of the Eastern church, the great liturgical traditions of Catholicism and Protestantism. This was connected with the feeling that Evangelicalism was liturgically inadequate: too simplistic, without a sense of transcendence or depth, aesthetically inane, culturally parochial. Some Evangelicals studied carefully the traditions of the broader church, and some of them defected to church bodies that are not generally considered Evangelical: Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy.

Others have remained within Evangelical churches, but have urged upon their denominations a greater respect for broader Christian traditions. I applaud this development as a symptom of a reawakening of biblical ecumenism.¹⁷ But insofar as this movement represents a weakening of the *sola Scriptura* principle, I fear that its ultimate thrust will be anti-ecumenical, for it will forfeit the only firm basis for a reunion of the church.

These developments have come, of course, through historical study, and they have both presupposed and confirmed a higher evaluation of the importance of tradition than has been common in Evangelicalism. Indeed, conversations with former Evangelicals who have crossed the wall into these other movements often turn on the subject of *sola Scriptura*. Converts from Evangelicalism often report that their turning point came with a radical questioning of *sola Scriptura*, leading to an identification of tradition (of course *including* Scripture) as the fundamental source of revelation.

¹⁶ Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947.

¹⁷ See my *Evangelical Reunion*.