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CHURCH AUTHORITY AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: FORMS OF AUTHORITATIVE HERMENEUTICS IN IRENAEUS AND TERTULLIAN

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Abstract

In order to protect the church from the misuse of scripture promoted by heretical movements, early church fathers advanced hermeneutical mechanisms of control to guide biblical interpretation, which included forms of authoritative hermeneutics. The present investigation describes and briefly analyzes occurrences of these forms in Irenaeus and Tertullian, focusing on the concepts of the rule of truth/faith and church authority. The conclusion of the article highlights inadequacies of authoritative hermeneutics.

Keywords: authoritative hermeneutics, Irenaeus, Tertullian, rule of faith, church authority.

Introduction

In many cases, the Apostolic Fathers[1] interpreted the Scriptures[2] using what David Dockery calls a "functional hermeneutic," meaning that "the readers

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[1]He defines this title "as a designation of a group of church leaders" (such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna) "and their writings between A.D. 90 and 150." David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 48.

[2]In his explanation of the concept of Scripture in the early church, Rowan A. Greer notes that "a Christian Bible is the product of the formative period of early Christianity (30–180 C.E.). Before Irenaeus, we find the church struggling to define its Scriptures and to come to terms with their interpretation, but . . . by the end of the second century . . . Christianity has yielded to an ecumenical unity. The emergence of a Christian Bible is a central feature of that unity." James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 111. For helpful information about the development of the canon of the New Testament, see F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988); Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989); Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013).

applied the text to their own context and situation without attention to its original context or situation."[3] However, the emergence of heretical movements brought about the necessity of thinking seriously about the hermeneutical enterprise. Most of these heretical movements were labeled as Gnosticism.[4] Many Gnostics "argued that salvation was achieved through access to a secret teaching" that had been orally passed down from the apostles, "and that it was to be found in a 'veiled' form in the Bible. Only those who knew how to read the Bible in a certain way could gain access to this knowledge."[5] The Gnostic challenge raised the

[3]Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 45. This hermeneutical approach developed especially in the context of the church's worship, since biblical interpretation in that period "was grounded in the church's exposition, not in the theoretical analysis of the academy." Indeed, "almost all of the church's interpretation of Scripture and corresponding theologizing developed from the sermon." Ibid., 46, 47.

[4]Alister McGrath indicates that "there is a growing consensus that the term 'Gnosticism' is misleading in that it gathers together a number of quite disparate groups and presents them as if they represented a single religious belief." Alister E. McGrath, *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 118. To Hans Jonas, Gnosticism may be understood in a narrow or a broad sense. In the first case, "the Church Father considered Gnosticism as essentially a Christian heresy and confined their reports and refutations to systems which either had sprouted already from the soil of Christianity (e.g., the Valentinian system), or had somehow added and adapted the figure of Christ to their otherwise heterogeneous teaching (e.g., that of the Phrygian Naassenes), or else through a common Jewish background were close enough to be felt as competing with and distorting the Christian message (e.g., that of Simon Magus). [Nevertheless,] modern research has progressively broadened this traditional range by arguing the existence of a *pre-Christian Jewish* and a *Hellenistic pagan* Gnosticiscism." Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 2001), 33. For further information about Gnosticism, see Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960); Gershom Gerhard Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1960); Robert McLachlan Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem: A Study of the Relations between Hellenistic Judaism and the Gnostic Heresy* (London: Mowbray, 1958); Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (London: Tyndale, 1973).

[5]Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 40. For the most comprehensive English publication of Gnostic writings, see James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 4th rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1996). N.T. Wright challenges the notion that Gnostic teachings were innovative and creative ideas that aimed to sweep away traditional and established orthodox Christian beliefs. Actually, "the Gnostics were the cultural conservatives sticking with the kind of religion that everyone already knew." Conversely, "it was the orthodox Christians who were breaking new ground, and risking their neck as they did so." Nicholas T. Wright, *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus: Have We Missed the Truth About Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 101.

question of what makes a specific interpretation of the Bible legitimate, and a functional hermeneutic approach could neither answer that question nor restrain the Gnostic interpretation of the Scriptures.

This challenge set the stage for the transition in the second century from functional hermeneutics to authoritative hermeneutics.[6] Authoritative hermeneutics, articulated mainly by Irenaeus (c. 115–202) and Tertullian (c. 160–225), are broadly characterized by their controlled readings of Scripture. In this article, I will attempt to briefly describe and analyze the hermeneutical mechanisms of control suggested by Irenaeus and Tertullian, observing especially how church authority plays a role in their suggestions. I will start this discussion with Irenaeus.

Forms of Authoritative Hermeneutics in Irenaeus

In his anti-Gnostic theology,[7] Irenaeus attempted to provide a hermeneutical method distinct from the allegorical approach,[8] as the allegorical approach does not offer specific parameters to guide/control interpretation. Overall, there are two main keys in his method that could be regarded as parameters for interpretation, namely, the notion of the rule of truth/faith[9] and the role of tradition.[10]

[6]This statement is not meant to imply that the early fathers originally employed only functional hermeneutics and that they then switched to only authoritative hermeneutics. Rather, the point here is that, as Dockery indicates, these approaches were sequentially influential in the early church.

[7]D. Farkasfalvy, "Theology of Scripture in St. Irenaeus," in *The Bible in the Early Church*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1993), 48.

[8]Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 178. McRay points out that, given the anti-Gnostic context, "it is with the question of the right interpretation of Scripture that Irenaeus is fundamentally concerned." John McRay, "Scripture and Tradition in Irenaeus," *Restoration Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1967): 1. Robert Grant indicates that Irenaeus was of "great significance in his analysis of the relation between the two Testaments. Indeed, he was the first Christian theologian to take biblical history seriously, and to set forth the permanent value of the Law." Robert M. Grant, *The Bible in the Church: A Short History of Interpretation* (New York: Macmillan 1948), 59.

[9]The expressions "rule of *faith*" and "rule of *truth*" are used interchangeably in Irenaeus and Tertullian.

[10]I do not intend to use the term "tradition" anachronistically, by infusing in it any contemporary meanings. Rather, this term should be read with the basic meaning of "passing down" or "that which is passed down."

The Rule of Truth

As Kugel and Greer emphasize, Irenaeus held that the interpretation of Scripture must take place within "an organic system or framework which constitutes the shape and the meaning of God's revelation. Without the system, God's revelation is not intelligible. Placed within another system, that revelation is distorted and perverted." Irenaeus referred to this correct hermeneutical framework as "the truth," "the canon (or rule) of truth."[11] Before I move to a few remarks regarding this hermeneutical framework, it must be noted that the exact relationship between the rule of truth/faith and Scripture is not always clear in Irenaeus. As Morwenna Ludlow indicates, Irenaeus "sometimes suggests that Scripture is record of the rule of faith, [but] at other times he asserts that the rule of faith is derived from, or at least founded on, Scripture."[12] Therefore, it is not easy to

[11]Philip Hefner, "Theological Methodology and St. Irenaeus," *Journal of Religion* 44, no. 4 (1964): 299. Irenaeus also refers to this concept as "the body of truth," and "the hypothesis of Faith." See ibid. Even though this concept is generally used to describe outline statements of Christian belief that circulated in the second and third century, it is first found in Irenaeus, since he "created his whole theology around scripture and the *regula fidei.*" Prosper S. Grech, "The Regula Fidei as a Hermeneutical Principal in Patristic Exegesis," in *The Interpretation of the Bible: The International Symposium in Slovenia*, ed. Joze Krašovec (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 590. See also F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, "Rule of Faith," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1434; Dietmar Wyrwa, "Rule of Faith: Early Church," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, eds. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Erwin Fahlbusch, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 758, 759; R. P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (London: SCM, 1962), 75; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Continuum, 2006), 76–82. For further information about the concept of Rule of Faith in the second and third century, see Paul Hartog, "The 'Rule of Faith' and Patristic Biblical Exegesis," *Trinity Journal* 28, no. 1 (2007): 65–86; Grech, "The Regula Fidei as a Hermeneutical Principal in Patristic Exegesis," 590; Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church,* 75–129.

[12]Morwenna Ludlow, "'Criteria of Canonicity' and the Early Church," in *Die Einheit der Schrift und die Vielfalt des Kanons / The Unity of Scripture and the Diversity of the Canon*, eds. John Barton and Michael Wolter (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003), 87. An example of a statement implying that the rule of truth is not exactly found in Scripture is Irenaeus' contention that a Christian believer will be able to recognize a wrong reading of Scripture by keeping in mind the rule of truth received by means of baptism (see *Haer.* 1.9.4). Conversely, an example of a statement implying that the rule is evident from Scripture is the suggestion that the body of truth is clearly and harmoniously evident in Scripture (see *Haer.* 2.27.1). Both statements will be mentioned below. As Jonathan M. Armstrong highlights, "It is true that the rule of faith served as hermeneutical principle for Irenaeus, and therefore it would seem incorrect to conclude that for Irenaeus the rule of faith represents the Scriptures themselves. Nevertheless, as Markschies notes, insofar as Irenaeus maintains the Scriptures to be complete and comprehensible in and of themselves, it is clear that the canon of Scripture and the rule of faith are very closely associated for Irenaeus." Jonathan

determine whether the rule of truth/faith chronologically precedes Scripture or follows it. In the former case, the rule of truth was likely an oral summary of apostolic teaching. In the latter, the rule was likely an oral summary of apostolic teaching derived from Scripture.[13] I will address this point later, based on Oscar Cullmann's reflection on true apostolic tradition. For now, I will elaborate on the idea that the rule of truth/faith and Scripture are closely related.

In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus expounds his conception of the rule of truth in contrast to the hermeneutical approach adopted by the Gnostics. Since the Gnostics' interpretation includes only some parts of Scripture,[14] they disregard its order and connection and, then, "dismember and destroy the truth."[15] He graphically compares this approach to someone rearranging the pieces of a beautiful mosaic and transforming the image, constructed out of precious jewels by a skillful artist, from that of a king into that of a dog or a fox. In other words, they pull apart the system found in Scripture and use its pieces to create their own system.[16]

Nevertheless, Irenaeus emphasizes that those who previously knew the correct system of Scripture are capable of recognizing the biblical pieces without being deceived by the false mosaic. In his words, someone "who retains unchangeable in his heart the rule of the truth which he received by means of baptism, will doubtless recognize the names, the expressions, and the parables taken from the Scriptures, but will by no means acknowledge the blasphemous use which these men make of them."[17] Hence, the wrong system may be properly identified, and rejected, through the previous knowledge of the right system (the rule of truth),

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J. Armstrong, "From the Κανὼν Τῆς Ληθείας to the Κανὼν Τῶν Γραφῶν: The Rule of Faith and the New Testament Canon," in *Tradition and the Rule of Faith in the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J.*, eds. Ronnie J. Rombs and Alexander Y. Hwang (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 45.

[13]Several scholars affirm that the rule of faith was not a written text (not a creed or a formula). J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (London: Continuum, 2006), 76; Ludlow, "'Criteria of Canonicity' and the Early Church," 88; Annette Yoshiko Reed, "ΕΥΑΙΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ: Orality, Textuality, and the Christian Truth in Irenaeus' "Adversus Haereses"," *Vigiliae Christianae* 56, no. 1 (2002): 13, 14. The fact that the references to the rule of truth or faith in Irenaeus and Tertullian do not indicate a common formula seem to corroborate this affirmation.

[14]Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.8.1 (*ANF* 1:326).

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid., 1.9.4 (*ANF* 1:330). As Bertrand de Margerie points out, "in specifying that the rule is received with and through baptism, Irenaeus seems to suggest that, when he uses this expression, he is thinking primarily of the living doctrine of the churches which is communicated to neophytes." Bertrand de Margerie, *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis: The Greek Fathers* (Petersham, MA: Saint Bede's, 1991), 53.

which includes the main beliefs taught before baptism, such as the trinity, the creation, the incarnation, the passion and resurrection, and the judgment and salvation.[18]

According to this view, the rule of truth "was not a competitor with Scripture."[19] Indeed, the following quotation from Irenaeus seems to indicate that the rule is found in Scripture: "these things are such as fall [plainly] under our observation, and are clearly and unambiguously in express terms set forth in the Sacred Scriptures . . . the body of truth remains entire, with a harmonious adaptation of its members, and without any collision [of its several parts]."[20] In fact, Irenaeus argues that "the entire Scriptures, the prophets, and the Gospels, can be clearly, unambiguously, and harmoniously understood by all."[21] These

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[18]"The Church, though dispersed through our the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: [She believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His [future] manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father 'to gather all things in one,' and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Saviour, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, 'every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess' to Him, and that He should execute just judgment towards all; that He may send 'spiritual wickednesses,' and the angels who transgressed and became apostates, together with the ungodly, and unrighteous, and wicked, and profane among men, into everlasting fire; but may, in the exercise of His grace, confer immortality on the righteous, and holy, and those who have kept His commandments, and have persevered in His love, some from the beginning [of their Christian course], and others from [the date of] their repentance, and may surround them with everlasting glory." Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.10.1 (*ANF* 1:330, 331).

[19]Hartog, "The 'Rule of Faith' and Patristic Biblical Exegesis," 66.

[20]Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.27.1 (*ANF* 1:398). Mary Ann Donovan affirms a dialogical relationship between the rule of truth and the Scriptures, "the Rule of Faith governs right exegesis, and the Scriptures . . . explain the Rule of Faith." Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading? A Guide to Irenaeus* (Collegevielle, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 11.

[21]Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.27.1 (*ANF* 1:398). Irenaeus does not conceive the rule of truth merely as an intellectual method, but also as a personal disposition or orientation. Hartog, "The 'Rule of Faith' and Patristic Biblical Exegesis," 68. In his view, "certain characteristics of humility, obedience, diligence in study and personal devotion, and blameless conduct mark the persons who do perceive the true faith." Therefore, "Irenaeus' method is inseparable from a certain kind of personal life and faith." Hefner, "Theological Methodology and St. Irenaeus," 300. In this way, the proper interpretation of Scripture demands devotion, "piety[,] and the love of truth." Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.27.1 (*ANF* 1:398).

statements seem to invalidate the notion of the rule of truth/faith being a hermeneutical grid externally imposed on Scripture. Rather, it appears that Irenaeus understood the rule to be consistent with what is found in Scripture. However, if this is the case, in what sense would the rule of truth be hermeneutically helpful to Christians as they read Scripture? Perhaps, the rule of truth would remind Christians to read Scripture according to its own logic, which was concisely expressed in the rule of truth.

The Role of Tradition

Instead of analyzing in depth the correct system of beliefs implied in the rule of truth or the specific contours of its hermeneutical role, Irenaeus appeals to the argument of the homogeneity in Christian tradition,[22] as far as the rule is concerned. While I am aware that some scholars view both the rule and Scripture as part of the tradition of the early church,[23] I will use the language of tradition in this section to refer specifically to practices of the church, including the role of church leaders. One important practice to be considered here is the reference to the teaching of the early church. Irenaeus highlights the homogeneity of Christian tradition in *geographical* terms, affirming that the correct system of truth is

[22]The role of tradition in Irenaeus' theology has been debated among scholars. Hefner presents four significant positions: (1) "Scripture is a strong force in the church, but it is decisively subordinated to the living tradition which preserves and interprets Scripture" (Damien van den Eynde); (2) "Irenaeus is beholden to the church as his chief authority; but inasmuch as it is the spirit of the Old and New Testament scriptures that lives in the church" (John Lawson); (3) "Faith (or truth) flows in the church in two channels which possess equal authority: Tradition and Scripture. It is Scripture, however, which dominates Irenaeus' concern . . . tradition serves as a formal norm and hermeneutical principle for interpreting Scripture, which serves as a material norm for the Irenaean theology" (Andre Benoit); (4) Irenaeus does not subordinate "either Scripture or tradition to the other ... [and he does not employ] tradition as a hermeneutical principle for expounding Scripture ... [the] appeal to apostolic tradition and succession is a formal proof that the church's doctrine is identical with revelation, and appeal to Scripture is a material proof" (E. Flesseman-van Leer). Hefner, "Theological Methodology and St. Irenaeus," 294, 295. See also Andre Benoit, "Écriture Et Tradition Chez Saint Irénée," *Revue d'Histoire de Philosophie Religieuse* 40, no. 1 (1960): 32–44; Andre Benoit, *Saint Irénée: Introduction À L'etude De Sa Théologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960), 75, 76, 217–219; Damien van den Eynde, *Les normes de l'enseignement chrétien dans la littérature patristique des trois premiers siècles* (Paris: Duculot, 1933), 261–280; John Lawson, *The Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus* (London: Epworth, 1948), 97–118, 292, 293; E. Flesseman-van Leer, *Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1954), 103–124.

[23]See, e.g., Ludlow, "'Criteria of Canonicity' and the Early Church," 88.

harmoniously taught by all churches throughout the world.[24] Regarding the role of church leaders, Irenaeus stresses the *historical* continuity of the rule of truth. More specifically, he points out, the teaching proclaimed by the church (of his day) was the same teaching delivered by the apostles, since the bishops in the churches had inherited, by apostolic succession, the proper understanding of the Christian truth.[25]

Whereas the Gnostics claimed that "the truth was not delivered by means of written documents, but *vivâ voce*,"[26] Irenaeus attempts to prove that the true oral tradition belongs to the church.[27] In fact, he presents a successive list[28] of all the bishops from the days of the apostles to his own day, in order to provide historical evidence of a genuine continuity of teaching from the apostles to the

[24]"The Churches which have been planted in Germany do not believe or hand down anything different, nor do those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world." Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.10.2 (*ANF* 1:331). He adds, "the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony." Ibid.

[25]"Those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times; those who neither taught nor knew of anything like what these [heretics] rave about. For if the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they were in the habit of imparting to "the perfect" apart and privily from the rest, they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the Churches themselves. For they were desirous that these men should be very perfect and blameless in all things, whom also they were leaving behind as their successors, delivering up their own place of government to these men." Ibid., 3.3.1 (*ANF* 1:415).

[26]Ibid., 3.2.1 (*ANF* 1:415).

[27]Hans von Campenhausen argues that "such an appeal in confirmation of one's own tradition corresponds exactly to the Gnostic methods of proof against which it is used, and which, as similar but far better and more trustworthy evidence, this time in favour of the true tradition, it seeks to refute." Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969), 163.

[28]This list was probably prepared about the year 180 by Hegesippus. According to Von Campenhausen, he attempted "to demonstrate historically the existence of a continuous tradition. He refers to the unbroken chain of bishops, which guarantees the undistorted transmission of doctrine in all orthodox churches." It seems that, "fifteen years after Hegesippus, Irenaeus was in Rome, and became acquainted with the list of bishops which he then incorporated into his anti-gnostic work." Ibid., 163–165. Hegesippus' work is lost excepting some fragments preserved by Eusebius. Hugh Jackson Lawlor, *Eusebiana: Essays on the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), 98–107.

bishops of the second century.[29] As successors of the apostles, the bishops received the gift of understanding and teaching the truth. Irenaeus describes the bishops as "those who, together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the certain gift of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father."[30] According to him, "they expound the Scriptures to us without danger."[31]

Some scholars believe Irenaeus understood this gift as a divine revelation comparable to the prophetic gift. Kugel and Greer argue that the necessity of this gift indicates that the proper order of the rule of truth, "though implicit in Scripture, is made explicit only by revelation."[32] For Farkasfalvy, the interpreter

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[29]"The blessed apostles, then, having founded and built up the Church, committed into the hands of Linus the office of the episcopate. Of this Linus, Paul makes mention in the Epistles to Timothy. To him succeeded Anacletus; and after him, in the third place from the apostles, Clement was allotted the bishopric. This man, as he had seen the blessed apostles, and had been conversant with them, might be said to have the preaching of the apostles still echoing [in his ears], and their traditions before his eyes. Nor was he alone [in this], for there were many still remaining who had received instructions from the apostles. In the time of this Clement, no small dissension having occurred among the brethren at Corinth, the Church in Rome despatched a most powerful letter to the Corinthians, exhorting them to peace, renewing their faith, and declaring the tradition which it had lately received from the apostles. ... From this document, whosoever chooses to do so, may learn that He, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, was preached by the Churches, and may also understand the apostolical tradition of the Church, since this Epistle is of older date than these men who are now propagating falsehood, and who conjure into existence another god beyond the Creator and the Maker of all existing things. To this Clement there succeeded Evaristus. Alexander followed Evaristus; then, sixth from the apostles, Sixtus was appointed; after him, Telephorus, who was gloriously martyred; then Hyginus; after him, Pius; then after him, Anicetus. Sorer having succeeded Anicetus, Eleutherius does now, in the twelfth place from the apostles, hold the inheritance of the episcopate. In this order, and by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles, and the preaching of the truth, have come down to us. And this is most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the Church from the apostles until now, and handed down in truth." Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.3.3 (*ANF* 1:416).

[30]Ibid., 4.26.2 (*ANF* 1:497). To Jerome Quinn, this is the prophetic gift possessed by those who transmit the word of God. Jerome D. Quinn, "Charisma Veritatis Certum: Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4, 26, 2," *Theological Studies* 39, no. 3 (1978): 521.

[31]Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.26.5 (*ANF* 1:498). "Where, therefore, the gifts of the Lord have been placed, there it behooves us to learn the truth, [namely,] from those who possess that succession of the Church which is from the apostles, and among whom exists that which is sound and blameless in conduct, as well as that which is unadulterated and incorrupt in speech. For these also preserve this faith of ours in one God who created all things; and they increase that love [which we have] for the Son of God." Ibid.

[32]Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 175.

(the bishop) needs to possess the same gift that the prophets and apostles had.[33] Karlfried Froehlich, meanwhile, concludes that although the rule of truth is the key to interpreting the Scriptures, this key must be handled by gifted interpreters.[34] However, Irenaeus does not explain the specific contours of the gift in enough detail to warrant the interpretation of divine/prophetic revelation. At the same time, Irenaeus's understanding of the authority of the bishop with regard to biblical interpretation, as informed by a list of historical apostolic succession and the reference to a gift, does seem to at least open the door for authoritative hermeneutics, where biblical interpretation is controlled by the authority of the bishop.[35]

Forms of Authoritative Hermeneutics in Tertullian

As with Irenaeus, Tertullian's discussion about biblical interpretation is essentially restricted to his works against Gnosticism.[36] And again, the most important aspect

[33]Farkasfalvy, "Theology of Scripture in St. Irenaeus," 325, 333.

[34]See Karlfried Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 14.

[35]I agree with McRay's point that "if tradition [in the language of this article, I would say *church authority*] were the fundamental concern of Irenaeus it is inexplicable why, having gone at such length to trace out apostolic succession in Rome and to establish the validity of it for bishops everywhere [see *Against Heresies* 3.1-4], he does not make appeal to that authority rather than the Scripture. Instead, immediately after his extended discourse on the subject he . . . reverts to the Scripture." McRay, "Scripture and Tradition in Irenaeus," 9. This perspective is evident in the following statement, "Since, therefore, the tradition from the apostles does exist in the Church, and is permanent among us, let us revert to the Scriptural proof furnished by those apostles who did also write the Gospel." See Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.5.1 (*ANF* 1:417). Thus, McRay concludes, "throughout the entire work he makes his arguments from Scripture and not from authority resident in bishops." McRay, "Scripture and Tradition in Irenaeus," 10. Likewise, Hanson stipulates that Irenaeus "never believed that the Scriptures without the authoritative exegesis of the Church are incomprehensible." Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church,* 108. From this perspective, Irenaeus' appeal to historical apostolic succession and the idea of gift of truth does not seem to be logically necessary for the construction of his account of proper biblical interpretation. However, his appeal to this form of church authority appears to open the door to some type of authoritative hermeneutics in church history. L. W. Countryman speaks of a "growing importance of the bishops as guarantors of apostolic doctrine. By the late second century, the catholic churches everywhere seem to have been firmly committed to the monarchical episcopate." L. W. Countryman, "Tertullian and the Regula Fidei," *Second Century: A Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2, no. 4 (1982): 223.

[36]Tertullian's *Prescription against Heretics* is one of his most important treatises concerning the interpretation of the Scriptures. Geoffrey D. Dunn, "Tertullian's Scriptural Exegesis in *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14, no. 2 (2006): 141. Generally speaking, whereas Irenaeus basically wrote in opposition to Gnosticism,

of Tertullian's hermeneutic is also related to the concepts of the rule of truth/faith and tradition.[37]

Tertullian "had a greater number of opponents: Gnostics, Jews, and pagans." Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1994), 24. According to J. Waszink, Tertullian "was driven at once into a series of controversies which were as various as they were continuous. The debate both with the pagan authorities and with many forms of the Christian faith which he felt constrained to regard as faulty or even corrupt, remained for him throughout his life a living reality and even a necessity." J. H. Waszink, "Tertullian's Principles and Methods of Exegesis," in *The Bible in the Early Church*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1993), 271. It seems that there is no modification in his hermeneutical understanding between the Catholic and the Montanist periods. Francis Aloysius Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* (New York: Newman, 2001), 154–160. In a broad view, the writings of Tertullian date from 196 to 220. Nevertheless, they may be divided in two parts: "his fully Catholic period (196–206) and those showing the influence of his adherence to the 'New Prophecy' or Montanism." Ibid., 154. Montanism was a movement that "began around 173 in Phrygia, Asia Minor, where a certain Montanus and two women disciples of his began to utter prophecies in a state of ecstasy. Claiming to be spokespersons for the Paraclete, they predicted an imminent end of the world and called for more rigid standards of morality than currently observed in the Christian churches of their day. In particular they declared that the Paraclete restricted the forgiveness of grave sins to God, denying to the Church or its bishops the power to absolve them." Ibid. For further information about Montanism, see Sandford Fleming, *Montanism: Its Conflicts with the Church and Its Influence Upon Orthodoxy* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Baptist Divinity School, 1925); John De Soyres, *Montanism and the Primitive Church: A Study in the Ecclesiastical History of the Second Century* (Charleston, SC: Nabu, 2010); William Tabbernee, *Montanist Inscriptions and Testimonia: Epigraphic Sources Illustrating the History of Montanism* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997); Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Although his later writings became more critical against the Catholic bishops, "Tertullian remained orthodox in regard to the basic Christian dogmas." Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*, 154.

[37]As Bryan Litfin indicates, "Tertullian did indeed enunciate scattered exegetical principles that seem to be vitally important to him. Yet to expect these statements, which were occasional in nature, to serve as the keys for unlocking Tertullian's interpretive system is misguided at best. Such an approach focuses undue attention on hermeneutical method, a preoccupation which did not really characterize the ancient authors. When it comes to Tertullian, we find much more emphasis on the specific content of doctrinal matters. ... It is his use of the *regula fidei* that will serve as the master key for unlocking the mystery of his biblical interpretation." Therefore, "to understand his hermeneutics, we must examine Tertullian's appropriation of the *regula fidei* as an overarching interpretative device which provide the meta-narrative to which individual scriptures must conform." Bryan M. Litfin, "Tertullian's Use of the Regula Fidei as an Interpretive Device in *Adversus Marcionem*," in *Studia Patristica: Papers Presented at the Fourteenth International Conference on*

Froehlich highlights that, for Tertullian, "the true battlefield is not interpretation but the very right to use Scriptures at all."[38] According to Tertullian, only the church may interpret the Scriptures: "from what and through whom, and when, and to whom, has been handed down that rule, by which men become Christians? For wherever it shall be manifest that the true Christian rule and faith shall be, *there* will likewise be the true Scriptures and expositions thereof, and all the Christian traditions."[39] In this quotation, Tertullian characterizes the rule of faith[40] in the following way: (1) it has been handed down to the church; (2) it is the instrument by which people become Christians; (3) it is the correct faith.

Indeed, the rule of faith is the guarantee for Tertullian that the church of his day is the apostolic church, and vice versa: "we demonstrate whether this doctrine of ours, of which we have now given the rule, has its origin in the tradition of the apostles, and whether all other *doctrines* do not *ipso facto* proceed from falsehood. We hold communion with the apostolic churches because our doctrine is in no respect different *from theirs*."[41] Likewise, the existence of only one rule and

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Patristic Studies Held in Oxford 2003, ed. Frances M. Young, M. J. Edwards, and P. M. Parvis (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 405, 407.

[38]Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, 14.

[39]Tertullian, *Praescr.* 19 (*ANF* 3:251, 252).

[40]Tertullian portrays the rule of faith in terms of a summary of the creed, which includes (1) the Trinity; (2) the Creation; (3) the Incarnation; (4) the Passion and Resurrection; (5) The judgment and salvation. "Now, with regard to this rule of faith—that we may from this point acknowledge what it is which we defend—it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, *and*, under the name of God, was seen "in diverse manners" by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth He preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father; sent instead of Himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe; will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh." Ibid., 13 (*ANF* 3:249). See also Tertullian, *Prax.* 2 (*ANF* 3:598); Tertullian, *Virg.* 1 (*ANF* 4:27).

[41]Tertullian, *Praescr.* 21 (*ANF* 3:252, 253). "The churches, although they are so many and so great, comprise but the one primitive church, (rounded) by the apostles, from which they all (spring). In this way all are primitive, and all are apostolic, whilst they are all proved to be one, in (unbroken) unity, by their peaceful communion, and title of brotherhood, and bond of hospitality,—privileges which no other rule directs than the one tradition of the selfsame mystery." Ibid., 20 (*ANF* 3:252).

tradition in the various churches throughout the world attests that they are the apostolic church.

Furthermore, the unity of the churches in terms of doctrine indicates that they are not corrupted.[42] Thus, Tertullian concludes, "the Scriptures are the property of the church," since "there is a unity of doctrine between the apostles and the apostolic churches which proves that the apostolic churches possess the truth."[43] Conversely, the heretics do not have the right to use or to interpret the Scriptures.

At the end of his description of the rule of faith, Tertullian asserts that "this rule ... was taught by Christ, and raises amongst ourselves no other questions than those which heresies introduce, and which make men heretics."[44] In other words, the rule of faith provides sufficient information for Christian belief, while the heretics raise questions regarding additional information. Tertullian adds that the church does not have problems interpreting Scripture, because if Christians understand the rule of faith, they do not need to know anything else.[45]

This idea of the sufficiency of the rule appears elsewhere in Tertullian's writings as part of a response to someone who had additional questions: "be quite aware that it is better for you to remain in ignorance, lest you should come to know what you ought not, because you have acquired the knowledge of what you ought to know. 'Thy faith,' He says, 'hath saved thee,' not *observe* your skill in the Scriptures. Now, faith has been deposited in the rule; it has a law, and (in the observance thereof) salvation."[46]

In summary, Tertullian affirms that proper biblical interpretation belongs to the church, which seems to be a form of authoritative hermeneutics (biblical interpretation controlled by church authority), and he appears to suggest that the rule of faith should be used to delimit the issues (and even the scope of the issues) to be interpreted.

A Brief Analysis

Before evaluating the forms of authoritative hermeneutics indicated in this article, it is necessary to provide a brief comparison between Irenaeus and Tertullian. Based on the preceding description, it could be said that both Irenaeus and Tertullian affirm the rule of truth/faith and church authority as important or even necessary keys for biblical interpretation. However, there are significant distinctions between them. First, Irenaeus focuses on the idea of apostolic

[42]Ibid., 28 (*ANF* 3:256).

[43]Grant, *The Bible in the Church*, 88.

[44]Tertullian, *Praescr.* 13 (*ANF* 3:249).

[45]"To know nothing in opposition to the rule (of faith), is to know all things." Ibid., 14 (*ANF* 3:250).

[46]Ibid.

succession, whereas Tertullian emphasizes "the apostolic churches themselves as bearers of the apostolic tradition."[47] In contrast to Irenaeus, Tertullian does not mention the certain gift of truth received by the bishops in apostolic succession. Second, Irenaeus tends to discuss the rule of truth from the perspective of a systematic theologian (the rule as an organic system), whereas Tertullian appears to discuss the rule more from the perspective of a lawyer (the rule as a legal norm).[48] For Irenaeus, the preaching of the apostles is not different from the content of Scripture.[49] The system of truth is found in Scripture and is the real meaning of the Bible. This idea seems to imply that the rule of truth/faith conveyed the basic logic of Scripture. If this is the case, the rule would have had a positive hermeneutical function, as it would have guided the interpretation of Scripture on the basis of its own logic. By contrast, Tertullian runs the risk of subjugating the interpretation of the Scriptures to a legal norm, the rule of faith. As Eric Osborn points out, "in the hands of Tertullian" the rule of faith "begins as a barrier to enquiry" that "provides a basis for reasoning which limits the fantasy of heretics and unites the church universal."[50] In this case, the rule of faith would have had a negative hermeneutical function. Instead of guiding interpretation, the rule would have limited it.

An important point to be discussed in this analysis is the plausibility of the use of the rule of faith in biblical interpretation. The question of plausibility is complex because of the lack of information available to us regarding the exact content of the rule of faith. Overall, as I have indicated above, the references to the rule of faith show that there is no fixed formulation, which may point to the fact that it was an oral teaching. Oscar Cullmann holds that the rule was "transmitted in oral form" and "accepted as a norm alongside Scripture because it was considered as having been fixed by the apostles. What matters is not whether the apostolic tradition was oral or written, but that it was fixed by the apostles."[51] While I do not necessarily reject Cullmann's view, I am afraid that we cannot affirm it without hesitation because we do not know exactly the content of the rule. Judging from the different references to the rule in Irenaeus and Tertullian, it seems that the content of the rule was compatible with the content of the Scriptures. However, it must be reiterated that is not easy to determine with precision the content of an oral teaching. As far as the rule is considered to have

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[47]Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*, 170.

[48]See Robert L. Calhoun, *Scripture, Creed, Theology: Lectures on the History of Christian Doctrine in the First Centuries*, ed. George A. Lindbeck (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 156.

[49]See Eric F. Osborn, "Reason and the Rule of Faith in the Second Century AD," in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. Rowan Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 40.

[50]Ibid., 40, 54.

[51]Oscar Cullmann, "The Tradition," in *The Bible in the Early Church*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1993), 138.

been truly apostolic, it would have been a positive hermeneutical key in Irenaean fashion for biblical interpretation. On the other hand, if the oral rule underwent modifications from the original apostolic teaching, then this modified rule would be a negative hermeneutical key subjugating Scripture to church tradition. To be sure, someone could insert the Irenaean argument of historical apostolic succession to support the idea that the rule of faith was not modified and rather represents pure apostolic teaching. Nevertheless, this argument tends to blur the difference between apostles and bishops, or between "apostolic tradition and ecclesiastical tradition," to borrow Cullmann's terminology.[52]

Cullmann uses "the term 'apostolic' in its strict historical sense, and not in the extended sense often given to it by Catholic scholars who identify apostolic and ecclesiastical [or post-apostolic] tradition."[53] His distinction between these two types of tradition is based on the notion of the uniqueness of the apostolate, which is an "office which cannot be delegated. According to Acts 1:22 the apostle is . . . unique, because [of his] direct witness of the resurrection." Therefore, "the bishops succeed the apostles but on a completely different level." Actually, "the apostles did not appoint other apostles, but bishops." To be sure, "the Church also bears witness to Christ. But it cannot bear that direct witness which belongs to the apostles. Its witness is a *derived* witness, because it does not rest on the direct revelation which was the privilege of the apostle alone as an eye-witness."[54] When this distinction between apostles and bishops is blurred, the idea of apostolic succession in the context of biblical hermeneutics tends to subjugate biblical interpretation to church authority.

Conclusion

To conclude, even if we assume that the rule of truth/faith in Irenaeus and Tertullian is indeed a pure oral summary of the apostolic teaching, its use in biblical interpretation has two main limitations: the scope of the rule and the exegetical ambiguities of this method. Understandably, the rule could be considered "a reliable guide to the correct interpretation of a given biblical text," since it "was a summary of the overall scriptural story."[55] Nevertheless, the richness of the Scriptural revelation cannot be reduced to a summary. The rule should provide general guidelines for interpretation, not confine it. This seems to be the problem of Tertullian, insofar as he seems to limit the significant meaning

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[52]Ibid., 129, 130.

[53]Ibid., 109.

[54]Ibid., 127, 128. See also Von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, 295.

[55]Litfin, "Tertullian's Use of the Regula Fidei as an Interpretive Device in *Adversus Marcionem*," 410.

of Scripture to the rule of faith. Moreover, as a summary of the Christian belief, the rule is helpful only to judge the results (the content) of the interpretation, but it does not necessarily guide the specific method (the process) of this interpretation.[56] As a result, Irenaeus and Tertullian were quite ambiguous in their exegesis. They interpreted some passages literally, and others allegorically.[57] In Tertullian, for instance, "the Scriptures were to be interpreted in whatever way best supported the faith believed and lived by the Christian community."[58]

In summary, the forms of controlled hermeneutics found in Irenaeus and Tertullian are noteworthy in the following aspects: (1) they emphasize the church as the *locus* for the interpretation of the Bible; and (2) they highlight the summary of the apostolic belief as a guide for interpretation. However, their respective approaches have significant drawbacks: (1) Irenaeus' apostolic succession tends to ignore the distinction between apostolic and ecclesiastical traditions; (2) Tertullian's hermeneutic tends to restrict biblical interpretation to a summary of beliefs; and (3) neither Irenaeus' or Tertullian's hermeneutic provides a specific methodology for biblical interpretation, but only controls the results of the interpretation. Ultimately, these drawbacks may lead (or at least open the door) to some form of church authority in biblical interpretation.

[56]As Kugel and Greer indicate, "the Rule of faith is a negative rather than a positive principle. That is, it excludes incorrect interpretations but does not require a correct one. Of a given passage there may be many interpretations that are valid because they do not contradict the Rule of faith, but we cannot be sure of its true meaning." Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 178.

[57]For further information about allegorical interpretation in Irenaeus and Tertullian, see Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early* Church, 21–24; Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 178; R. P. C. Hanson, "Notes on Tertullian's Interpretation of Scripture," *Journal of Theological Studies* 12, no. 2 (1961): 273–279.

[58]Dunn, "Tertullian's Scriptural Exegesis in *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*," 155. According to Grant, for Tertullian, "the only way, ultimately, for him to determine whether to interpret a passage literally or to allegorize it was to see whether or not its plain meaning was in accordance with the teaching of the church." Grant, *The Bible in the Church*, 90.