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In defence of the Scripture principle: an evangelical reply to A. S. Khomiakov

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Introduction

The final triumph of religious scepticism has not yet arrived. But even at the present time one can consider that Western Europe as a whole does not have any religion, although it does not dare admit this.

Christianity of the West has committed suicide.¹

These words were written in 1855 by the Russian lay theologian Aleksei Stepanovich Khomiakov (1804-1860). In Khomiakov's view, the secularization of Western Europe is the result of the rejection of the Church. Protestants who claim to base their churches on Scripture alone, reject the historical continuity of the Church and rely on their own reason rather than on the Holy Spirit. In this paper I will attempt to defend the Scripture principle against Khomiakov's criticism. I will limit my discussion to the relationship between the New Testament and Church tradition, and leave questions regarding the Old Testament and how Evangelicals should relate to the Apocrypha for a later paper. I will not go into a detailed defence of individual NT texts in this paper, but will explain why the question of apostolicity is important. Khomiakov is not necessarily representative of mainstream Eastern Orthodox theology, but he provides good arguments against the Scripture principle, and it is for this reason that I have chosen him as my dialog partner. Khomiakov finds many other faults with Western Christianity, but I will focus on his criticism of the Protestant understanding of Scripture. Before examining his criticism, I will begin by briefly introducing Khomiakov, and then present some traditional Evangelical views of Scripture.

Khomiakov, a retired cavalry officer who had served in the Russo-Turkic War (1828-29), gentleman farmer, amateur philosopher, poet and historian with a degree in mathematics from Moscow University,² is best known as being one of the founding figures of the Slavophile movement, which flourished in nine-

1 A. S. Khomiakov, 'Some more remarks by an Orthodox Christian concerning the Western Communions' (1855), Jakim & Bird 1998, 101, 102.

2 Boris Jakim & Robert Bird, (translators & editors), *On Spiritual Unity: A Slavophile Reader* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Books, 1998), 12.

teenth century Russia.³ He was also a theologian, though he never held any official position in the Russian Orthodox Church. Seven essays are said to comprise the essence of Khomiakov's theological output. Six of these seven were originally written in French and published in pamphlet form abroad; they did not appear in Russian until after his death.⁴ These six articles are: 'Some remarks by an Orthodox Christian concerning the Western Communions' (1853),⁵ 'Some more remarks by an Orthodox Christian concerning the Western Communions' (1855);⁶ 'Some more remarks by an Orthodox Christian concerning the Western Communions, on the occasion of several Latin and Protestant religious publications' (1858);⁷ 'Letter to M. Bunsen, preceded by a letter to the editor of *L'Union Chrétienne*' (1860); 'Letter to Monseigneur Loos, Bishop (Jansenist) of Utrecht' (1860); 'Letter to the editor of *L'Union Chrétienne*, on the occasion of a discourse by Father Gagarin, Jesuit' (1860). The seventh article is 'The Church is One' (1844 or 1845, but first published in 1864).⁸ In addition he corresponded with Anglican theologian William Palmer between 1844 and 1854.⁹ Although Khomiakov did not greatly influence the Church during his lifetime, he left his mark on later Russian Orthodox theology.

Khomiakov's theological essays are of great interest to the Western reader, as they address him directly. Khomiakov was well acquainted with developments

- 3 Ivan Kireevsky is commonly considered the other founder of the movement; other leading members of the group are Petr Kireevsky, Konstantin Aksakov, Ivan Aksakov, Yurij Samarin (Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *Russia and the West in the Teaching of the Slavophiles: A Study of Romantic Ideology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), page 29).
- 4 Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, 'A. S. Khomiakov's Religious Thought,' *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 23 (1979), 87-100, page 89. These were published in Russian as a book in 1867 in Prague (Jakim & Bird 1998.161), and in French as part of the book *L'Eglise Latine et la Protestantisme au point de vue de l'Eglise d'Orient* (Lausanne & Vevey, 1872).
- 5 Translated into English in Alexander Schmemmann, ed., *Ultimate questions: an anthology of modern Russian religious thought*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977), 31-69, abbreviated in this article as Khomiakov, 1853 Remarks.
- 6 Translated into English in Jakim & Bird 1998.63-116, referred to in this article as Khomiakov, 1855 Remarks.
- 7 Translated into English in Jakim & Bird 1998.117-134, referred to in this article as Khomiakov, 1858 Remarks.
- 8 *Tserkov' odna: Opyt katekhizicheskago izlozhenija uchenija o tserkvi*. I refer to the translation by Nicolas M. Zernov, ed., *The Church is One; by Alexy Stepanovich Khomiakov with an introductory essay on Khomiakov, his life, times, and theology*. (London: The Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1968), as 'Khomiakov, Church 1968' and to Jakim & Bird's translation as 'Khomiakov, Church 1998'.
- 9 Twelve of his letters to Palmer (written 1844-1854) were published by W. J. Birkbeck, *Russia and the English Church during the last fifty years. Vol 1 containing a correspondence between Mr. William Palmer, fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, and M. Khomiakoff, in the years 1844-1854*. (London: Rivington, Percival & Co., 1895), reprinted in 1948. His third and fifth letters are also included in Jakim & Bird 1998.

in Christianity in England and Britain in the mid 1800s. A significant event at this time was the formation of the Evangelical Alliance in Great Britain in 1846. The Evangelical Alliance was in part a reaction against the Tractarians, a high church movement in the Church of England, which tended toward a rapprochement with the Roman Catholic Church. The Alliance sought to enable Evangelical Protestants to realize the spiritual unity of the church while allowing them to remain members of their respective denominations. To help in this task, the Alliance formulated a common theological platform. The first two articles put forward at the first conference of the Evangelical Alliance address the doctrine of Scripture: (1) 'The Divine inspiration, authority, and sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures; (2) The right and duty of private judgment in the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures.'¹⁰ Although he does not actually refer to the Evangelical Alliance by name, Khomiakov's criticism of the Protestant Scripture principle can be seen as an answer to these articles. He was personally acquainted with William Palmer (1811-1879), Anglican theologian at Magdalen College, Oxford, associated with the Oxford movement, and he visited England for the second time in 1847,¹¹ the year after the founding of the Evangelical Alliance.

Scripture and tradition

A century and a half have passed since the founding of the Evangelical Alliance, but the Alliance's stance on Scripture is still shared by many Evangelical Protestants. Many Evangelical Protestant denominations still appeal to Scripture as the only foundation for doctrine and practice. For example, the Assemblies of God's Fundamental Truth #1 reads:

The Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, are verbally inspired of God and are the revelation of God to man, the infallible, authoritative rule of faith and conduct. 2 Timothy 3:15-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:13, 2 Peter 1:21.

The Southern Baptist Convention's 'Baptist Faith and Message' (2000) has the following statement on the Scriptures:

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.

Exodus 24:4; Deuteronomy 4:1-2; 17:19; Joshua 8:34; Psalms 19:7-10; 119:11,89,105,140; Isaiah 34:16; 40:8; Jeremiah 15:16; 36:1-32; Matthew

10 <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds3.v.viii.html> (accessed 22 April 2010)

11 Riasanovsky, *Slavophiles*, 34, 36

5:17-18; 22:29; Luke 21:33; 24:44-46; John 5:39; 16:13-15; 17:17; Acts 2:16ff.; 17:11; Romans 15:4; 16:25-26; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Hebrews 1:1-2; 4:12; 1 Peter 1:25; 2 Peter 1:19-21.

The second article of the Lausanne Covenant (1974), a defining document for many Evangelicals, reads:

We affirm the divine inspiration, truthfulness and authority of both Old and New Testament Scriptures in their entirety, as the only written word of God, without error in all that it affirms, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice. [...] II Tim. 3:16, II Pet. 1:21, John 10:35, Isa. 55:11; I Cor. 1:21, Rom. 1:16, Matt. 5:17,18; Jude 3; Eph. 1:17,18, 3:10,18.

Denominations that consider Scripture the only foundation for doctrine and practice do not explain how they know this to be true; the statement is after all part of a statement of faith, and is presumably accepted on faith. These denominations typically maintain that Scripture is the Word of God and that it is infallible, and in support of that statement they offer some Biblical references, as in the examples above. In basing their doctrine on Scripture alone, these Protestant churches are following the example of the reformers. In trying to reform the Church of teachings and practices they considered wrong, the reformers sought to base their arguments on Scripture alone. A classic statement of this principle is the answer Luther gave the Imperial Diet of Worms, 1521:

Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.

The same notion is expressed in the epitome of the Lutheran *Formula of Concord* (1577):

(1) We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the old and New Testaments alone, as it is written Ps 119:105: Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. And St. Paul: Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed, Gal 1:8

(2) Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, [which are to show] in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this [pure] doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.¹²

The Westminster Confession 1647 also expresses the *sola Scriptura* principle:

¹² www.bookofconcord.org/cf-ep.php

6.006: The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture; unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

6.010: The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture.

The reformers tried to show that Scripture teaches that the Church is based on Scripture, not the other way around. In his lectures on the Psalms Luther writes, 'The Scripture is the womb from which are born the divine truth and the church.'¹³ Calvin supports his claim that Scripture is prior to the Church by referring to Eph. 2:20, where Paul says of the household of God, that is, the Church, that it is 'built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.'¹⁴

The reformers did not have much choice than to base their arguments on Scripture alone. The pope's word carried no authority for them; after all, Pope Leo X had excommunicated Luther and his followers, and Luther had identified him as the Antichrist. It was apparent that teachings of the Church contradicted each other; on what basis could the Reformers argue that one theologian's writings were more reliable than another's, or that the decisions taken by an ecumenical council were infallible?

But the appeal to Scripture alone is not without its problems. Khomiakov argued that when Protestants seek to base their teaching and practice on Scripture alone, they reject the temporal continuity of the Church. 'The man who takes Scripture only, and founds the Church on it alone is in reality rejecting the Church, and is hoping to found her afresh by his own powers.'¹⁵ There is some truth to Khomiakov's charge. Historically, many Protestants have explicitly rejected the temporal continuity of the Church. The radical Anabaptists of the 1500s rejected the continuity of the Church. Khomiakov could have quoted the radical reformer Sebastian Franck (c.1499 – c.1542), writing in 1530: 'Foolish Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Gregory – of whom not one even knew the Lord, so help me God, nor was sent by God to teach. Rather, they were all apostles of Antichrist.'¹⁶ He could also have referred to the Anabaptist leader Bernhard Rothmann (c.1495- c.1535), who wrote in the 1530s, 'For fourteen hundred

13 Quoted by John T. McNeill in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles. (London: SCM Press, 1961), page 76.

14 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles. (London: SCM Press, 1961), 1.7.2

15 Khomiakov, *Church* 1968, 23

16 Quoted in Alistair McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Second ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 221

years there have been no Christians on earth.¹⁷ A similar view prevailed among leaders of many American Protestant denominations in the early 1800s. Hatch writes, 'Elias Stone, Lorenzo Dow [1777-1834, Methodist], Alexander Campbell [1788-1866, Reformed Baptist], Francis Asbury [1745-1816, Methodist], Barton Stone [1772-1844, 'Christian'], Joseph Smith [1805-1844, LDS], and William Miller [1782-1849, Advent movement] all believed that, since the age of the apostles, a great falling away had severed the relationship between God and man, leaving the visible church virtually extinct during the dark Ages.'¹⁸ Early Pentecostal leaders also had strong restorationist tendencies. Aimee Semple McPherson in her sermon 'Lost and Restored' said:

No wonder they are called the Dark Ages. Ah! Dark indeed is the night without Jesus.... men and women groping in the darkness tried to win their way to heaven by doing penance, by locking themselves up in dungeons, walking over red hot plowshares in their bare feet, and inflicting unnameable tortures upon themselves and upon one another, blindly trying by some work or deed to pay the debt that had already been paid on Calvary's rugged cross.¹⁹

Few Protestant denominations today are so explicit in their rejection of the temporal continuity of the Church, but this is still the stance of some restorationist denominations, most notably the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the church committed apostasy in the age of Constantine I (as foretold by Paul in 2 Thess. 2:3) at the first council of Nicea, only to be re-established by Charles Taze Russell in the late 1800's; the Witnesses are the only true Christians.

Khomiakov's friend Ivan Kireevsky points out that the stance of these Protestants is internally inconsistent; it contradicts Christ's own promise, that not even hell would prevail over the Church (Matt. 16:18).²⁰ Thus, this radical view, held by people who claim to follow Scripture alone, is contrary to Scripture. It follows that Protestants who wish to be true to Scripture cannot deny the temporal continuity of the Church.

Most Protestant denominations today do not explicitly deny the temporal continuity of the Church, but Khomiakov would claim that anyone who intentionally ignores 1500 years or more of theological reflection and liturgical development, implicitly denies the temporal continuity of the Church. Therefore

17 Quoted in McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 221

18 Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 167

19 Quoted in S. L. Ware, 'Restorationism in Classical Pentecostalism' in *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, (Zondervan, 2003), page 1019.

20 Compare Kireevsky: 'Protestants saw nothing except falsehood and delusion between their own time and the early centuries of Christianity. They thought that, in spite of the promises of the Savior, the gates of hell had prevailed over the Church [Matt. 16:18], that the Divine Church had been dying before they came along, and that it was left to them to resurrect it upon the foundation of the Holy Scripture.' (Jakim & Bird 1998.240)

Khomiakov argues that all Protestant confessions are founded on a conscious break in tradition; they all 'acknowledge an interruption in ecclesiastical tradition lasting for several centuries.'²¹

Khomiakov further argues that not only does the Protestant *sola Scriptura* principle imply the rejection of the temporal continuity of the Church, but that otherwise the Protestant separation of Scripture and tradition is incoherent.

Khomiakov's criticism prompts me to take a closer look at our presuppositions regarding the nature of Scripture, tradition and the Church. I hope to show that there is good reason to grant Scripture greater authority than other traditions, and that those who seek to base their theology on Scripture alone do not necessarily reject the temporal continuity of the Church. Khomiakov's argument is rather complex, and I have divided it up into the simpler arguments that compose it, to make it easier to understand and reply to.

1. Scripture is based on oral tradition.

Khomiakov claims that Scripture is based on oral tradition.

Do not works precede the Scripture and Tradition? Does Tradition not precede the Scripture? Did Tradition not exist for our forefathers, beginning with the first progenitor, Adam? Were not the works of Noah, Abraham, and the forefathers and representatives of the Old Testament church pleasing to God? Did Christ not give freedom to humanity and verbal teaching before the apostles bore witness to the work of redemption and the law of freedom with their own writings?²²

Khomiakov has a point. Christians do not claim that the Bible fell down from heaven as a fully formulated text, nor ought we claim that its contents down to the very last letter were revealed to the apostles through divine dictation. Certainly many traditions of our Lord circulated in oral form before they were written down in the Gospels. It is not likely that Jesus' disciples always had a pen and papyrus handy to record what he said and did. Luke does not claim to base his Gospel on direct revelation from the Holy Spirit, but on information gathered from eyewitnesses (Luke 1:2). He explicitly acknowledges his dependence on an earlier tradition; New Testament scholars today generally assume that one of the traditions that Luke refers to was Mark's Gospel. Although Church tradition identifies him as one of Jesus' twelve disciples, Matthew is also thought to base his account in part on Mark's Gospel as well as on another source which he had in common with Luke, which scholars call Q. Matthew and Luke are thought to have built on other traditions as well. These were not free-floating traditions of course. Luke spoke with specific witnesses, and Matthew presumably did the same.²³ Mark must have also based his account on what he had heard others say

21 Khomiakov, 1853 Remarks, 41

22 Khomiakov, *Church* 1998,35

23 For a defence of the Gospels as being based on the testimonies of eyewitnesses, see Bauckham, Richard, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

about Christ, as he does not claim to be an eyewitness himself, and cannot be identified with one of the apostles. Traditionally Mark's primary source has been identified as Peter.²⁴ Clearly, the Synoptic Gospels are dependent on tradition. And just as Luke's Gospel builds on prior written and oral traditions, so too does his other work, Acts – even if sections of Acts may be Luke's own eyewitness narrative: 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1 – 28:16.

Paul's letters are written compositions, but Paul himself was in part dependent on oral traditions for his knowledge of Christ. Paul encountered the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus, and so had first hand knowledge of Jesus, and on occasion Paul will claim direct inspiration for a teaching. For example, his conviction that Gentiles do not need to first become Jews to belong to Christ was based on divine revelation.²⁵ But we also know that the Apostle Paul had heard about Jesus from others – both before and after his conversion experience – and that he handed on what he had heard in both written and oral form.²⁶

In some sense, the synoptic Gospels, Acts and Paul's letters, and certainly many other parts of the NT rely on tradition. Second generation Lutheran reformer Martin Chemnitz recognized this meaning of the term 'tradition', and considered tradition in this sense to be a valid authority.²⁷ But since this tradition was incorporated into the NT, and can now only be reconstructed on the basis of our NT, there is no point in demanding allegiance to it rather than to the NT. The authority of this tradition is theoretical. But then Khomiakov might ask, if the Gospels were based on oral traditions, why do we implicitly accept the oral traditions underlying the Gospels and not other oral traditions circulated by the Christian community?

2. *Why are written documents superior to oral traditions?*

Since the Scriptures have their basis, at least in part, in oral tradition, it follows that there can be no sharp distinction between Scripture and tradition. Khomiakov writes, 'Scripture is nothing but written Tradition, and Tradition is nothing but living Scripture.'²⁸ Just because one is written down and the other is oral, it

24 According to Papias, Mark's primary source was Simon Peter (Holmes, Michael W. ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of their Writings*. J. B. Lightfoot & JR Harmer, editors and translators (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), page 569).

25 Gal. 1:11-12: 'For I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.'

26 'Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received... For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received...' (1 Cor. 15:1, 3); and 'So then, brothers, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.' (2 Thess. 2:15) (also 2 Tim. 1:13-14).

27 Cf. Hägglund, Bengt, *Tro och verklighet: tre studier i 1900-talets teologihistoria* (Skellefteå: Artos & Norma, 2007), 76.

28 Khomiakov, 1853 Remarks, 53.

does not follow that one is superior to the other.

An Evangelical Protestant would agree that Scripture is written tradition, but would continue by saying that the fact that it is written makes it more reliable. Our Scriptures consist of ancient texts continually used by the Church, and ancient manuscripts allow us to reconstruct the original texts with great confidence. We cannot reconstruct the original form of an oral tradition with the same accuracy.

Someone might ask why this should be so. Why should a Biblical text that changed over time be any less authoritative than the original? Don't textual changes simply reflect its use in the Church, and isn't the Church led by the Holy Spirit? This may seem an unlikely argument, but this is essentially what KJV-only churches teach. The translators working for King James were somehow uniquely inspired, making their translation inerrant.²⁹ The Roman Catholic Church used to have a similar view of the Vulgate; somehow Jerome was uniquely inspired in his translation.³⁰ And some Russian Orthodox believers have a similar relationship to the so-called Majority Text used as a basis for the Synodal translation. There are several reasons why we reject this view. One is that clearly not all changes to the Biblical text are inspired. Most are simply scribal errors.

Many Protestants want to have the sacred text in a form as close to the original as possible, for the same reason that Orthodox Christians such as Khomiakov oppose changes to the Nicene Creed. It is the original text that unites the Church. Textual changes are not uniform; different scribes made different changes to the text; as these changes are propagated, they contribute to dividing the Church.

Further, the original text is the one that most accurately reflects the original human authors' intentions. And as will be argued next, the authority of the texts that comprise the NT is dependent on their authenticity. The more the text is altered, the less reliable a witness it is.

Thanks to the number and age of manuscripts for the NT, we can reconstruct the NT text with a good deal of confidence. The same cannot be said for the oral

29 Compare the statement of faith of the Bible Believers' Church Directory: 'We believe the King James "Authorized Version" Bible to be the perfect and infallible word of God. We believe the Bible was inspired in its origination and then divinely preserved throughout its various generations and languages until it reached us in its final form. By this we mean that the Authorized Version preserved the very words of God in the form in which He wanted them to be represented in the universal language of these last days: English.' (<http://www.biblebelievers.com>. Accessed 21 April 2010.)

30 Cf. Canon and Decrees of the Council of Trent, The Fourth Session, 1546, Decree Concerning the Edition and the Use of the Sacred Books: 'the same sacred and holy Synod, – considering that no small utility may accrue to the Church of God, if it be made known which out of all the Latin editions, now in circulation, of the sacred books, is to be held as authentic, – ordains and declares, that the said old and vulgate edition, which, by the lengthened usage of so many years, has been approved of in the Church, be, in public lectures, disputations, sermons and expositions, held as authentic; and that no one is to dare, or presume to reject it under any pretext whatever.' (<http://www.bible-researcher.com/trent1.html>).

traditions of the Church. In theory an oral tradition that had not been recorded in written form for several centuries could still accurately reflect a saying of Jesus; but there is no way of knowing with any certainty that the tradition actually is that old. Other religious traditions have oral traditions which are demonstrably ancient; a clear example is the Sanskrit Rigvedas. These are poetic texts recited in very archaic language. I know of no Christian oral traditions that show a similarly archaic language and fixity of meter that would allow us to confidently date them to the first Christian century. There are then several reasons that we value the written Gospels more highly than the oral traditions of the Church. Although our written texts are largely based on oral traditions, we use the written texts to judge the reliability of other (oral) traditions, because we can be reasonably sure of the age and authenticity of the written texts.

3. *Who is ultimately the author of Scripture?*

Khomiakov argues that Tradition and Scripture should not be separated from each other; they both proceed from the same Spirit acting in the Church: ‘The whole Church wrote the Holy Scriptures and then gave life to them in Tradition.’³¹ Khomiakov explains that while he believes that the traditional ascriptions of authorship of the NT books are correct, he does not consider this matter important.

Unbelief is maintaining that the Gospels are not by St. Mark, or by St. Luke, or by St. John, and that the Epistles are not by St. James, or by St. Jude, or by St. Paul. Be that as it may. But they *are* of the Church, and that is all the Church needs.³²

This argument may seem attractive. Should the traditional authorship of a NT book be questioned, the one whose faith rests with the authority of the Church can continue to use that text, unperturbed. But can an Evangelical Protestant agree with this stance? I don’t think so. For an Evangelical, the apostolicity of the NT texts is essential. The NT texts are authoritative to the extent that they are the work of the apostles or their immediate disciples.³³ We believe that the

31 Khomiakov, 1853 Remarks, 53.

32 Khomiakov, 1855 Remarks, 106.

33 Cf. Hägglund, *Tro och verklighet*, 72. This is not the view of Martin Luther; for him theology rather than authorship was most important. ‘That which does not teach Christ is still not apostolic, even if it were the teaching of Peter and Paul. On the other hand, that which preaches Christ, that would be apostolic even if Judas, Annas, Pilate or Herod did it.’ (Quoted in Bruce, F. E., *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1988), 244). But Luther’s view risks becoming circular – if the theology of a text determines its authority, then there is a super-scriptural norm that determines the extent of normative scripture, and then one cannot claim to be basing one’s theology on Scripture alone. (Compare Einar Thomassen, ‘“Forgery” in the New Testament.’ In James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer, eds., *The Invention of Sacred Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 154.)

NT texts bear witness to Christ's life and teaching and to the life and teaching of the apostles. Should a NT text prove to date from the mid-second century, say, it would no longer be as reliable a witness to what Jesus said and did, and would therefore lose much of its authority, even if its theology was on all counts orthodox.³⁴ We cannot prove that any NT text was actually written by an apostle or the immediate student of an apostle, but if we could prove that a text was composed much later than the age of the apostles, it would lose much of its authority for us. For example, if it were proven that Paul did not write the Pastoral Epistles in any sense of the term 'to write', those letters would be forgeries, however well-intentioned, and would not be authoritative.³⁵ And we have seen that in practice these letters have lost much of their authority among more liberal Protestants, who do not believe they were written by Paul, but were composed some time after his death.³⁶

Historically, the key factor in determining whether a text was included in the NT canon was whether it was apostolic, that is to say, whether it was judged as the authentic work of the apostles or their immediate disciples.³⁷ Several NT authors appeal to their proximity to Christ to support their authority. For example, Luke (1:2) claims his Gospel is based on eyewitness accounts, and John is identified as having been written by an eyewitness (John 21:24; see also John 19:35).³⁸ Many other Gospels purported to have been authored by apostles; there are gospels ascribed to Philip, Thomas, Judas, Matthias, Bartholomew and Mary. These were not included in the canon because the Church – or that part of the Church that compiled our canon – could not vouch for their authenticity, and in fact found that there were good reasons for questioning the authenticity of these works. The language, style, and theology were so different from texts that had been generally accepted as authentic, that it was difficult to believe they could have been written by Christians from the same time and belonging to the same group.³⁹ Works such as the *Shepherd of Hermas* and *1 Clement* were not considered heretical, but they were not included in the canon because their authors did

34 Cf. Lee Martin McDonald, 'Identifying Scripture and Canon in the Early Church: The Criteria Question,' in Lee Martin McDonald & James A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 416-439, page 424: 'From early times the church's most important weapon against the gnostics and other "heretics" was its claim to apostolicity, which guaranteed that its oral and written traditions were genuine.'

35 So also Thomassen, *Forgery*, 154.

36 For a convincing defense of Pauline authorship of 1 and 2 Timothy, see L. T. Johnson's commentary in the Anchor Bible series (2001). It should be noted that for Johnson, a Roman Catholic, the authority of these texts does not depend on their Pauline authorship.

37 Cf. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.25.4-7.

38 See Richard Bauckham, 'The Fourth Gospel as the Testimony of the Beloved Disciple,' in Richard Bauckham & Carl Mosser, eds., *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 125.

39 Cf. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.25.

not belong to the first Christian generation.⁴⁰ Like the Gospels, these texts were written by members of the Church, and to some extent they must therefore have been inspired by the Spirit, but that was not sufficient reason to include them in the canon. Our faith is a historical faith, not a timeless philosophy. We do not believe that the Church has always existed; rather we believe it was founded at a certain time and place.⁴¹ Texts that witness to the human career of the divine founder of our faith are of central importance. John writes, 'No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known' (John 1:18). Jesus words and deeds reveal God to us in a way that nothing else can. These words and deeds are therefore of central importance to us.

In addition to apostolicity, other criteria were also used to determine whether a text should be included in the canon. The text must have proven useful in the life of the Church. Paul wrote other texts besides the epistles included in the NT, but they were not preserved.⁴² Certain letters may have been too personal to have been widely copied and circulated (this may incidentally explain the scant manuscript evidence for the Pastorals); they may have been too critical of the recipient, and therefore destroyed after having been read (as perhaps was the case with the letter to the Corinthians mentioned in 2 Cor. 2:4, 7:8-9); or perhaps their theological significance for other Christians may not have been appreciated. Other texts were not preserved because they served no purpose for the Church. Had a shopping list written by Paul been preserved, it would have been very interesting for a historian, but of little use in guiding the Church, and would not have been included in the canon.

The Gospels are not only historical documents. They do not only tell about Jesus' life and teaching. All parts of the NT, including the Gospels, are characterized by theological reflection. One reason that we value the NT writings over other Church traditions is that eyewitness testimony is superior to second hand reports. But Evangelicals also value the theological reflections of the NT more highly than later theological reflection. In an effort to guarantee the unique position of Scripture, some Protestants developed views quite close to the one Khomiakov rejects. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) wrote regarding the gifts of the Spirit, including prophecy, 'Since the canon of the Scripture has been completed, and the Christian Church fully founded and established, these extraordinary gifts have ceased.'⁴³ This position, known as cessationism, was further developed by two Princeton theologians in the early part of the twentieth century,

40 Cf. McDonald, 'Identifying Scripture,' 435: 'The early church never limited the concept of inspiration to its sacred writings, but rather extended it to everything considered theologically true, whether it was written, taught, or preached.'

41 Contrary to Khomiakov (*Church* 1968, 19), who writes that the Church has existed since the foundation of the world.

42 Compare for example the epistle to (or possibly from) the Laodiceans referred to in Col. 4:16.

43 Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and its fruits, or, Christian love as manifested in the heart and life* (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1856), 43.

B. B. Warfield (1851-1921) and John Gresham Machen (1881-1937).⁴⁴ Khomiakov asks why tradition following the establishment of the New Testament canon should be any less trustworthy than that preceding its establishment, unless one assumes that the Holy Spirit had left the Church.

... the Church has not been, nor could she be, changed or obscured, nor could she have fallen away, for then she would have been deprived of the spirit of truth. It is impossible that there should have been a time when she could have received error into her bosom, or when the laity, presbyters, and bishops had submitted to instructions or teaching inconsistent with the teaching or spirit of Christ.⁴⁵

The assumption of the cessationists is not grounded in Scripture, as Christ promised the Spirit would be with his disciples forever (John 14:16-17). The cessationist claim is furthermore contradicted by Church history. As Shogren shows, the Catholic Church continued to assume that the gifts of the Spirit were still given to the Church, even when it had a recognizable NT canon.⁴⁶ Thus, the cessationist stance is not viable.

But are Evangelicals closet cessationists anyway? When Evangelicals value NT over later theologians, does this mean we believe that the apostles were more inspired than later theologians, including their Christian counterparts today? Does that mean we implicitly believe that the presence of the Holy Spirit has grown continually weaker, even if we might not go so far as to claim that the Spirit no longer gives his gifts to the Church? I don't think so. Evangelicals must logically affirm that the Spirit is still active in the Church, and nothing keeps us from being inspired by later Christian texts – as indeed we often are. The Protestant should agree with Khomiakov that there is no reason to assume that other traditions of the Church are completely unreliable. Indeed, Calvin writes, 'I am not arguing that all councils are to be condemned or the acts of all to be rescinded, and (as the saying goes) to be cancelled at one stroke.'⁴⁷ But just because other traditions are not unreliable, that does not mean that they are authoritative or that they should together with Scripture determine theology in today's churches, as I will argue in section 5 below.

One reason we value the theologizing of the apostles more highly than that of later Church leaders is because no matter how much we may feel the inspiration of the Spirit, the apostles had Jesus as their earthly teacher for several years.⁴⁸

44 Cessationists support their conviction that the gift of prophecy ceased after the closing of the canon by referring to 1 Cor. 13:8 and Rev. 22:19.

45 Khomiakov, *Church* 1968, 20.

46 G. S. Shogren, 'Christian Prophecy and Canon in the Second Century: A Response to B. B. Warfield.' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40:D (1997), 609-626.

47 Calvin, *Institutes* 4.9.8, p. 1171.

48 On the other hand, Paul claims that he was uniquely inspired, although he did not sit at Jesus' feet (Gal. 1:12). Perhaps he felt the need to defend his inspiration just because he did not study with Jesus during his earthly career like the other apostles.

The apostles themselves recognized the authority that this gave, and for that reason chose Judas' successor from among those who had been with Jesus from the time of his baptism to his ascension (Acts 1:21-22).⁴⁹ Furthermore, Evangelicals affirm that the Holy Spirit does not inspire members of the Church to formulate doctrine and ethical norms that directly contradict the doctrines and norms he had inspired earlier generations of Church members to put forward (compare Gal. 1:8; Jude 3).⁵⁰ It is necessary to compare the Church's theological formulations with the writings included in the NT, if for no other reason than because of the temporal primacy of the New Testament writings. Khomiakov has a similar stance: 'No fact in the Church can be understood except by analogy with similar facts certified by Scripture.'⁵¹ Khomiakov suggests that all theology was already revealed to the apostles;

'The fullness of ecclesiastical thought can already be felt in expressions of St. Paul [...] St. Thomas, inspired by the Spirit of truth, said to [the Lord]: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). The whole mystery of the Incarnation was clearly revealed to us from that moment.'⁵²

I should emphasize that for Evangelicals doctrinal continuity within the Church is crucial. It is less clear that there must be perfect doctrinal continuity between the Old covenant and the New. Some Old Testament teachings contradict teachings in the NT (compare for example the teaching of clean and unclean foods); that does not mean that the latter teachings are divinely inspired and the former are not, or vice versa. Rather, God had different expectations of the two communities.

4. Does the New Testament get its authority from the Church?

Khomiakov claims that the NT gets its authority from the Church, because it is the Church that determined the extent of the canon. 'The collection of Old and New Testament books, which the Church acknowledges as hers, are called by the name of Holy Scripture... Every writing that the Church acknowledges as hers is Holy Scripture.'⁵³ The Roman Catholic Church has had a similar view.⁵⁴

49 Cf. Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 114ff.

50 Gal. 1:8: 'But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed.' (RSV); Jude 3: '... I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.'

51 Khomiakov, 1855 Remarks, 73.

52 Khomiakov, 1858 Remarks, 130, 131.

53 Khomiakov, *Church* 1968, 24.

54 Compare Canon and Decrees of the Council of Trent, The Fourth Session, 1546, Decree Concerning the Edition and the Use of the Sacred Books, cited in footnote 29, above. Today the RCC claims its canon is part of the apostolic tradition: 'For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles, (see John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-20, 3:15-16), holds that the books of the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed

Calvin explicitly rejected the notion that Scripture is in any way dependent on the Church: 'It is a wicked falsehood that its [Scripture's] credibility depends on the judgment of the Church.'⁵⁵ He quotes Eph. 2:20, where Paul writes regarding the Church that it is "built on the foundations of the prophets and apostles". Calvin continues: 'If the teaching of the prophets and apostles is the foundation, this [teaching] must have had authority before the church began to exist.'⁵⁶ It seems Calvin is confusing the issue here. If we limit the Church to the people of the New covenant – which neither Khomiakov nor Calvin does – we can readily grant the temporal priority of the prophets. But it seems unnatural to separate the activity of the apostles from the life of the Church. Certainly after the resurrection it was as members of the body of Christ that the apostles were sent out.

Calvin supports his case by quoting Eph. 2:20, which he takes to be written by Paul. But this text cannot be used to support the temporal priority of all NT texts over the Church; the Church obviously existed before Paul became an apostle, as Paul admits to persecuting the Church before becoming an apostle (1 Cor. 15:9). While Eph. 2:20 may affirm the authority of other apostolic texts (even though we don't know which ones), how is its own authority affirmed? Assuming that Ephesians has the divinely inspired apostle Paul as its author (which many modern NT scholars strongly question), this verse can still hardly be used as a proof that the NT is divinely inspired – for the texts we now call the NT had not all been written, much less compiled, when these verses were written. An appeal to 2 Tim. 3:16 ('All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work') is problematic for the same reason: Assuming that this translation is correct,⁵⁷ and assuming 2 Timothy was written by Paul, which again is questioned, the Scripture to which he refers cannot be what we know as the New Testament. If we appeal to 2 Peter 3:15-16 to support the authority of the Pauline texts, we have the same problem. On what grounds do we judge that 2 Peter is an authoritative text? For a Bible-believing Evangelical the problem is acute. Because of the linguistic differences between the texts, modern NT scholars, as well as certain Church Fathers, widely question whether 2 Peter has the same author as 1 Peter.⁵⁸ Noting its dependency on Jude, they generally give it a post-apostolic date. Furthermore, a text is not necessarily inspired merely because it claims to be inspired; the Koran asserts its divine inspiration repeatedly, yet Christian readers remain unpersuaded.

Some Protestants maintain that when the Church accepted certain books as

on as such to the Church herself' (Dei Verbum §11). See also Dei Verbum §8: 'Through the same tradition the Church's full canon of the sacred books is known.'

55 Calvin, *Institutes* Book 1, chapter 7, caption (p. 74).

56 Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.2 (p. 75).

57 The verse can also be translated 'Every scripture inspired by God is also...' (RSV footnote).

58 2 Peter is not included in the Muratorian canon, and is listed as a disputed book by Eusebius (Hist. Eccl. 3.3.1).

canonical, it merely made explicit what all Christians already believed, through the witness of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit itself witnesses to the authenticity of the Christian Scriptures. This is the view taken by Grudem: 'The church cannot make something to be Scripture, but can only recognize what God has already caused to be written as his own words.'⁵⁹ While Christians may find this argument attractive, we cannot appeal to the Spirit's witness to convince others of its authority. While I believe a Christian reading the Bible with the Spirit's guidance hears the words of God, I am also convinced that people tend to hear what they expect to hear; a Muslim reading the Koran similarly believes he hears the very words of God. It takes more than a simple reading of the NT to convince most Muslims that it is inspired.

Khomiakov would argue that an appeal to Scripture's self-authentication instead of the Church's authority leads to each individual determining for himself which parts of Scripture he considers inspired. He notes that Luther questioned the authority of some parts of the New Testament (namely Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation), and asks why the questioning should stop there.⁶⁰ In his view, a rejection of tradition inevitably leads to a rejection of Scripture. For Khomiakov it is essential that the individual Christian trust the judgment of the Church, and not believe himself to be an arbiter of inspiration. But Khomiakov idealizes the unanimity of the historical Church. The judgment of the Church is in reality the judgment of individual teachers of the Church. In the case of some texts the Church Fathers did not agree whether they were authentic or inspired. Why should the Church Fathers be allowed to discuss the reliability of individual parts of Scripture, and later theologians be forbidden from doing the same thing? We should also remember that for all his gripes about James and the others, Luther didn't seriously move to exclude these books from the canon. He did not value his own judgment so highly that he could comfortably ignore the testimony of earlier generations of Christians.

Our New Testament Scriptures were written by members of the Church for members of the Church and were preserved and distributed because members of the Church considered them useful and authoritative. It follows that those who refer to the authority of Scripture tacitly grant legitimacy to some aspects of Church tradition.⁶¹ Hence if we reject tradition as completely unreliable, the appeal to the authority of Scripture ultimately becomes untenable. It would be foolhardy to utterly reject tradition, or to deny the historical continuity of the Church, but this doesn't mean that Scripture gets its authority from the Church.

Khomiakov argued that the decision on what was considered Scripture was determined by the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit. Most Protestants would

59 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 59.

60 Khomiakov, 1855 Remarks, 70. See Luther's Preface to the New Testament (1546) and his 'Vorrede zum Jakobus- und zum Judasbrief' (1522).

61 Lutheran reformer Martin Chemnitz had the same view (Hägglund, *Tro och verklighet*, 76).

agree. But I am wary of putting too much emphasis on this teaching. There is no need to mystify the creation of the NT canon. While the Church councils sought the guidance of the Spirit as they assembled the canon, and while I do not question that the Spirit had a role in establishing this canon, the key criterium in determining whether a text was included in the canon was, as has been argued, its authenticity. That is, those who assembled the canon were convinced that the texts they included in the NT were the works of the apostles or their immediate disciples.

It is not the Church that makes a NT text authentic; all 'the Church' (that is, individual church leaders) has done is witness to its conviction that a certain text is authentic.⁶² For the most part we have no reason to question the testimony of the Church, although we note that in the case of some books that were eventually included in the NT, not all the Church Fathers were fully convinced of the authenticity of the text (e.g. Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Revelation).⁶³

Even if we don't want to maintain that the Church as a whole wrote the NT books, but claim instead that its authors are apostolic and that this is the reason those books are authoritative, we must admit that the actual extent of our NT canon is still a product of the Church. For even if we assume that the NT canon was not the product of a single meeting or even a series of meetings,⁶⁴ but was something that evolved over time, one could still argue that tradition preceded Scripture, for the Church based its definition of the canon on its own practice, that is to say, tradition.

5. *The church and the canon*

But then Khomiakov might ask: if the Church determined the extent of the canon, and if Protestants believe the canon is so well defined that all books contained in it, but none outside it, are authoritative, why do Protestants reject other definitions made by the same Church? I would argue that the traditional Protestant view of the canon is in some respects too strong. We don't have to

62 Hågglund, *Tro och verklighet*, 92 'In any case it is clear that it is not the church that makes a book canonical, just as a court of law cannot make a testimony authentic, which isn't authentic already.' (My translation) 'I varje fall står det klart, att det inte är kyrkan som gör en bok kanonisk, lika litet som en domstol kan göra ett vittnesmål autentiskt, som inte redan är det.' Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.2 (page 76): 'While the church receives and gives its seal of approval to the Scriptures, it does not thereby render authentic what is otherwise doubtful or controversial.'

63 McDonald, 'Identifying Scripture', 432.

64 E.g. Laodicea 347, Rome 382, Carthage 397, Laodicea 419 (Lee Martin McDonald, 'Canon', in Ralph P. Martin & Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the New Testament and its Developments* (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity, 1997), 136). But see Gamble, Harry Y., 'The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Quaestionis,' in Lee Martin McDonald & James A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 291: 'It is worth noting that no ecumenical council in the ancient church ever ruled for the church as a whole on the question of the contents of the canon.'

assume that the New Testament could not have been any larger than it is. Texts outside the NT canon may well have been apostolic; but they were not used by that part of the Church which compiled the canon we have today, and for that reason they were not preserved. The apostles may have written other edifying texts, but since we no longer have access to those texts, or since the versions of the text to which we do have access show signs of later, unorthodox redactions (as seems to be the case with the Gospel of Thomas), there are no alternatives to the present NT canon. The present NT canon contains the best witnesses available to the life and teaching of Jesus and the apostles. In sum, while Evangelicals can consider the NT more authoritative than other texts and traditions, we can't logically claim to know that the New Testament is uniquely infallible and inerant in all its parts while maintaining that the definition of the canon is not the product of the Church.

6. Can Scripture be interpreted correctly by an individual acting on his own?

The second of the nine articles put forward at the first conference of the Evangelical Alliance in 1846 speaks of 'the right and duty of private interpretation in the Holy Scriptures.'⁶⁵ It was because Luther and the other reformers used their private judgment in interpreting Scripture that the reformation was possible. The Evangelical Alliance hoped to ensure that the various member churches would maintain this Protestant spirit of freedom that allows the individual believer to correct the accepted teaching of the Church.

Khomiakov argues that the Evangelical appeal to private judgment in interpreting Scripture is untenable. In fact, as a consequence of their stance on Scripture, Protestants had in Khomiakov's view devolved into a book cult. That which unites Protestants is their veneration of the Bible as a text; their understanding of that text on the other hand varies. Protestants, using Scripture, reason, and, they would claim, the guidance of the Holy Spirit as their guide, disagree on such basic points as whether infants should be baptised or not, whether the Eucharist is merely symbolic or whether it implies real presence, on whether the Sabbath should be celebrated on Sunday or Saturday, and on how the Church should be organized. Today they disagree on these points and more, including on whether women can serve as pastors, and whether it is appropriate for clergy to bless homosexual 'marriages'. The list of practices and dogmas about which Protestants disagree could be made long. Khomiakov concludes, 'The apparent unity [of Protestantism] has all the features of fetishism.'⁶⁶ In other words, Protestants relate to the Bible as an object of worship, but cannot understand its meaning, because the Bible cannot be correctly understood apart from the traditional teaching of the Church.

Khomiakov could also have argued that the divisions of Protestantism are to

65 <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds3.v.viii.html> (accessed 22 April 2010).

66 Khomiakov, 1855 Remarks, 74.

be expected, as the practice of individual interpretation of Scripture is contrary to Scripture. He could have appealed to the passage about the eunuch on his way to Gaza, Acts 8:30-33: Philip ran up to the chariot and heard [the Ethiopian court official] reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' The Ethiopian replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' Khomiakov could also have referred to 2 Pet. 1:20-21: 'First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.' It is only within the Church, the body of Christ, led by his Spirit that prophecies may be correctly interpreted. And what is said of prophecies, holds for other opaque Scriptural passages as well. Protestants who believe that they can properly interpret Scripture with the assistance of the Spirit alone deceive themselves; the Spirit is not the property of the individual Christian, but is given him as a member of the Church.

Evangelicals wish to base their doctrine on Scripture alone, but Scripture does not address all aspects of Church life. Many of the divisions between Protestants mentioned above are not caused by opacity of Scripture, as much as by the fact that Scripture does not address all these issues. The NT does not specify whether infants may be baptized; it does not specify how the elements of the Eucharist are to be understood, it does not specify whether the body of Christ should meet on Saturdays or Sundays or both. The early Church had answers to these questions, but they were not included in Scripture. The Church counted as Scripture those texts which were served as the basis for the teaching during the divine service of the Church – not texts relating specifically to the worship of the church (e.g. its songs and prayers), or its organization, or its canon law. These other texts were not necessarily less authoritative – but they related to other aspects of the life of the church. These other traditions have not disappeared, but have been further developed in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. In limiting itself to Scripture alone, Evangelicals are forcing Scripture to do things it was not intended to do.

The inability of Protestants to agree on the proper interpretation of Scripture is the strongest argument against the Scripture principle. Church history is filled with examples of people who were, for all we know, sincere believers, who interpreted Scripture on their own, and who ended up formulating views that the larger Church deemed heretical. One such example from the early Church is Arius, and in our times, Charles Taze Russell, founder of Jehovah's Witnesses. Both Arius and Russell formulated their doctrines appealing to Scripture alone, but their views were judged heretical. If Evangelicals use Scripture alone as their guide, how can they determine which of two contradictory interpretations of Scripture is correct? To solve this problem, Protestant denominations have formulated creedal documents that limit the individual's freedom of interpretation regarding those parts of Scripture that relate to certain key tenets of the faith. The Evangelical Alliance, like the churches and denominations that supported it, offered its own guidelines to interpreting Scripture. The nine points formulated at the first conference essentially specify how Scripture is to be understood.

The fourteen fundamental truths of the Assemblies of God and the *Baptist Faith and Message*, quoted at the beginning of this paper, also give an example of a normative interpretation of Scripture. Thus, Evangelicals have other guidelines than Scripture alone that tell the individual how to correctly interpret Scripture. But Protestants do not agree on what these guidelines are. Khomiakov would argue that the Protestant multiplication of creeds is unnecessary and divisive, as there already is one creed that has been accepted by the Church as a whole, the Nicene Creed.

When Khomiakov writes about the relationship between Scripture and tradition, the tradition he focuses on is the dogmatic decisions of the seven ecumenical councils, and especially then the Nicene Creed, which in his view is on a par with Scripture; ‘every writing which the Church acknowledges as hers is Holy Scripture. Such pre-eminently are the Creeds of the General Councils, and especially the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.’⁶⁷ This is similar to the orthodox Lutheran stance towards the ecumenical creeds as stated in the Epitome of the Formula of Concord,

(3) And because directly after the times of the apostles, and even while they were still living, false teachers and heretics arose, and symbols, i.e. brief, succinct [categorical] confessions, were composed against them in the early Church, which were regarded as the unanimous, universal Christian faith and confession of the orthodox and true Church, namely the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene creed, and the Athanasian creed, we pledge ourselves to them, and hereby reject all heresies and dogmas which, contrary to them, have been introduced into the Church of God.

Though the Lutheran churches have a longer list of creeds than the Orthodox, and while they do not address the *filioque* issue, Orthodox Lutherans clearly gave the creeds greater authority than other traditions – with the exception of Scripture. And as Hägglund points out, the orthodox Lutherans included the apostolic tradition in the category of Scripture.⁶⁸ Like Khomiakov, the orthodox Lutherans therefore had a more open view of Scripture and gave Tradition more authority than the radical reformers.

Should all Protestants agree with the conclusions of Lutheran orthodoxy? Or more specifically, should we put the apostolic tradition on a par with Scripture? Hägglund notes that the Church Fathers tended to value the apostolic tradition on a par with Scripture. Be that as it may, the apostolic tradition to which the Church Fathers referred was not the Nicene Creed, but resembled more closely the Apostles’ Creed, and also included some elementary ethical teaching. It would be nice to have the apostolic tradition clearly written out, and reconstructed in the same way as the Greek New Testament. But we don’t. Evangelicals accept certain creeds because they find they are consistent with Scripture. There is no reason for us to make a special exception for the Nicene Creed.

67 Khomiakov, Church 1968, 24.

68 Compare Hägglund, *Tro och verklighet*, 81.

Evangelicals differ greatly in how closely they follow the interpretative tradition of the Church. Luther's and Calvin's policy that doctrine should be based on Scripture alone did not imply a complete break with tradition. McGrath explains, 'While the notion of tradition as an extra-scriptural source of revelation is excluded, the classic concept of tradition as a particular way of reading and interpreting scripture is retained.'⁶⁹ Luther and Calvin and other leaders of the magisterial reformation were well versed in the theological heritage of the Church – they were Catholic scholars before becoming 'Protestants', and refer to certain theologians frequently – in part to win over their Roman Catholic readers, but primarily because they recognized the insights of earlier theologians. They didn't accept everything that has ever been taught by learned representatives of the Church. Indeed, Augustine himself did not consider his own writings to in any way be on a par with Scripture. He said in a sermon,

We, who preach and write books, write in a manner altogether different from the manner in which the canon of Scripture has been written.... I urge you charity, on my behalf and in my own case, that you should not take any previous book or preaching of mine as Holy Scripture.... If anyone criticises me when I have said what is right, he does not do right. But I would be more angry with the one who praises me and takes what I have written for Gospel truth (*canonicum*) than the one who criticises me unfairly.⁷⁰

The Roman Catholic would not consider this statement of Augustine to be problematic. Like the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church rejects private judgment in interpreting Scripture. The Roman church insists that it is the Church's magisterium, that is, 'the pope and the bishops in communion with him,'⁷¹ loyally preserves (and develops) tradition:

The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on... (Dei Verbum §10).

As an individual theologian, Augustine is not infallible. He was but one member of the church's magisterium. This is a significant difference between the disagreements in the Roman Catholic Church and those among Protestants. In the Roman Catholic Church, when disagreements become too divisive, the

69 Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 130. This corresponds to Chemnitz' fourth sense of 'tradition'; cf. Hägglund, *Tro och verklighet*, 78. See also Craig Allert, 'What are we trying to conserve: Evangelicalism and Sola Scriptura' *The Evangelical Quarterly* 76.4 (2004), 327-348.

70 A sermon by Augustine, quoted by Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography. New Edition, with an Epilogue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 451.

71 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1993, 1.1.2.2.III

magisterium can decide which interpretation is normative. Khomiakov's view is similar to that of the Roman church, although communion with the pope is not a defining feature of the Orthodox sobor, rather it is the consensus of the whole church that is authoritative. Khomiakov is also selective about which traditions he accords authority. He does not consider the Church Fathers infallible; both Gregory of Nyssa, the favourite theologian of the Eastern Orthodox, and Augustine, the favourite of the West, could make mistakes.

The illustrious Gregory of Nyssa could (according to Barsonophius) give the most erroneous explanation of the reasons that justify human misery on earth. The saintly bishop of Hippo, in wishing to explicate the mystery of the nature of God in the Trinity of His hypostases, could write things that bring an involuntary smile to the lips of an intelligent reader.⁷²

It is the Ecumenical councils which determine doctrine, and their dogmatic decisions, Khomiakov maintains, are without fault. He would not suggest that every local church tradition is infallible, much less the writings of any individual theologian.⁷³ Orthodox adherence to the decisions of the ecumenical councils of the Orthodox, and Roman Catholic obedience to the magisterium guarantee the unity of (their part of) the Church. Among Protestants, if one denomination should exclude a theologian for his aberrant views, and should he not be welcomed into another denomination, he can always found a new denomination. Thus, the Protestant churches continue to divide, and their unity becomes increasingly less apparent – to an outsider.

The Evangelical would respond that as far as members and councils and the magisterium of the Church let themselves be led by the Spirit of truth, they do not err. But how can we assume that they are always led by the Spirit? Calvin wrote, 'That the Jews had a true church under the prophets cannot be denied,'⁷⁴ and Khomiakov would agree. He writes that the Church has existed since the creation of the world and will continue to exist until all God's works are completed.⁷⁵ But Calvin continues: apparently, the general council of the Old Testament church could and did err, for example when it unanimously condemned Micahiah, who alone spoke the truth (1 Kings 22:26-27). Why should one assume that later Church councils have been prevented from erring? Indeed, whole councils have been declared errant, for example the second council of Ephesus (AD 449). In claiming that the Church is inerrant, Khomiakov glosses over the tension between the already and the not yet. As is the case throughout his works, he simply assumes that his denomination, the Eastern Orthodox Church, has already reached eschatological perfection, at least in respect to its teaching.

Khomiakov wrote that the unity of Protestants was a false unity. But does his

72 Khomiakov, 1858 Remarks, 132.

73 'Local errors are not errors of the Church, but errors into which individuals can fall by ignorance of the ecclesiastical rule' (Khomiakov, Third letter to Palmer, 148).

74 Calvin, *Institutes* 4.9.7.

75 Khomiakov, *Church* 1968, 19.

judgment of Protestantism hold up? Some 160 years have gone by since Khomiakov penned his critique of the Western confessions, and there are more Protestant denominations now than there were then. But in many respects divisions between Evangelical Protestants are less significant now than they were when Khomiakov wrote his articles. Evangelical Protestants read each others' books, study at each others' seminaries, support each others' ministries, and readily move from one denomination to another. The most significant divisions among Protestants today are not between denominations, but within them. It is a division between Evangelicals who strive to base their theology on Scripture alone, and theological liberals who don't. Apparently the shared intention of formulating doctrine by relying on Scripture alone, coupled with an acceptance of diversity in what we consider to be non-essential matters, is sufficient for the practical and spiritual, if not formal, unity of the Church.

Conclusion

Back to the first question: Can we found our theology on the Bible alone, without in some way denying the temporal continuity of the Church? When we use Scripture as the ultimate basis for our theology and practice, we do what members of the church have always done. The creeds are based on Scripture and the Church Fathers based their arguments on Scripture. As was mentioned above, Augustine clearly differentiated between Scripture and his own writings. In holding to Scripture as our basic authority, we hold on to the belief in a living dynamic Spirit who helps us apply Scripture to new situations, to explain it in new terms. In contrast, those who hold fast to an unchanging tradition, replace guidance of the Spirit with adherence to a historical tradition.

I have tried to show that the evangelical practice of granting Scripture higher priority than any other traditions is well-founded; it is justifiable, rational, and in accordance with the historical practice of the Church. But Khomiakov would argue that my defence of the Scripture principle is just another example of the Western reliance on reason, and is symptomatic of the secularization of the West. Protestants in Khomiakov's view only have conditional beliefs; they believe only in that of which their reason approves. But such a belief has nothing to do with faith. 'The entire belief of a Protestant is based on something purely conditional. But a conditional belief is only a disguised unbelief.'⁷⁶ Indeed, if I were convinced by empirical evidence and logical argument that the Gospels lacked any historical basis whatsoever, I would have a hard time believing. The Christian religion is after all a historical religion, not a timeless philosophy. The historical basis of the Christian faith is therefore of great importance. Nevertheless, while I hope my arguments above are deemed rational, my faith is not based on reason alone.

Faith is different from knowledge derived from empirical observation. Kho-

76 Khomiakov, 1855 Remarks, 70.

miakov refers to Heb. 11:1: 'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.' Faith is knowledge, however; it is inner knowledge. Khomiakov writes,

The faith that fathoms the divine mysteries is not belief but knowledge. But it is not knowledge of the kind we have of the external world. It is inner knowledge similar to the knowledge we have of the facts of our own intellectual life.⁷⁷

This kind of knowledge comes to a person only as a gift of the Spirit. It was not by empirical observation and logical deduction that Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah, but through the Spirit.⁷⁸ In this paper I have given rational arguments for Scriptural priority, but that does not mean that my relation to Scripture is defined by these arguments alone. Like Khomiakov and like most other Christians, I also sense the Spirit speaking through the Scriptures, and this is probably the main reason that I consider the Scriptures the Word of God. But because this interior experience is nothing I can convey through an academic paper, I do not deal with it here.

Abstract

The author presents a critique of western, protestant views of the authority of Scripture without any recourse to the authority of the church, or the traditions and theological confessions of the church, made by the Russian lay theologian Aleksei Khomiakov, who lived and wrote in the middle of the 19th century. Taken to task are some of the post-enlightenment tendencies towards a personalized and individualistic interpretation of Scripture by catholics, protestants, and in particular, evangelicals.

77 Khomiakov, 1858 Remarks, 121.

78 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven' (Matt. 16:17).

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