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This article examines the development of Christian tradition and authority, focusing on the paradigm shift precipitated by the invention of the printing press and the subsequent Reformation. The study argues that the year 1453, marked by the fall of Constantinople and Gutenberg's biblical printing, represents a watershed moment in which the Church's relationship to Scripture underwent fundamental transformation. Through historical analysis, the author contends that the pre-Reformation Church understood the Bible as an integral component of Holy Tradition alongside councils, patristic writings, hagiography, and ritual practices, rather than as an independent authority. The Reformation's principle of Sola Scriptura, while initially intended to purify the Church, is shown to be historically problematic, as the New Testament canon itself emerged from ecclesiastical discernment in the second century. The article identifies twelve specific practices in Orthodox and Catholic tradition (including veneration of Mary, saints, icons, infant baptism, prayers for the dead, and liturgical language) that lack explicit biblical foundation yet are not necessarily anti-biblical. The study concludes by calling for honest ecumenical dialogue in which traditional denominations provide robust historical and theological justification for these practices, and Protestant theologians remain open to re-evaluating their positions in light of historical evidence. Ultimately, the article advocates for a balanced approach that neither rejects tradition wholesale nor elevates it to equal authority with Scripture, proposing *Prima Scriptura* as a more historically tenable position than *Sola Scriptura*.

Keywords: Christian heritage, Sola Scriptura, Church tradition, Reformation, Gutenberg, 1453,

Canon, Ecumenical dialogue, Orthodoxy, Catholicism Original language: [Bulgarian](#)

The

Pivotal Year 1453 and the Dawn of Printing

Introduction: The Global Political and Religious Stage

It appears that 1453 is a momentous year. Let us begin with Russia. The legitimate ruler of the Rurik dynasty, Vasily II the Dark, after returning to the throne, managed to kill his own blinding perpetrator and main rival, Dmitry Shemyaka. This would enable his son, Ivan III, to consolidate power and subsequently elevate the idea of Moscow as the Third Rome following his marriage to Zoe Palaiologina. Ivan III would bring all his projects to success and during his reign quadrupled the territory of Russia. ¹

Constantinople falls. An "eternal" empire vanishes. The Balkan peoples conquered several decades prior would lose their last hope. The schism between Catholicism and Orthodoxy would deepen, the Renaissance active in Europe would be postponed in the Balkans for four centuries. Orthodoxy itself would experience a crisis and temporarily lose its influence on the main religious stage.

The Austrian princes officially receive recognition of the title "Archduke" from the Holy Roman Empire. Thus, Austria acquired a special status bordering on independence. This would lead to its gradual separation and growth into Austria-Hungary until the end of World War I. A European and always progressive empire.

In the Battle of Gavere, the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, would defeat the militia of Ghent, thus postponing the independence of Flanders (Belgium) for four centuries.

The Hundred Years' War between France and England ends. England would abandon its continental ambitions, transfer its power and genius to the seas and oceans, and gradually become a global maritime empire.

Gutenberg and the Revolutionary Accessibility of Scripture

Against the backdrop of these pivotal historical events, we will also discuss a technological one, which in scale comes to overshadow the political ones—namely, printing. Knowing that Johannes Gutenberg had his printing press around 1450 and began work on printing the Bible in 1452, we can freely point to 1453 as the year of the first printed biblical books (the work was

completed in 1455).

Scripture and Tradition in the Pre-² Renaissance Church

The Bible as an Auxiliary Part of Tradition

To claim that before these times the Church ² possessed the Bible freely would be an exaggeration. Paper reached Europe only in the 11th century. Papyrus was rare and needed protection from moisture, while parchment was expensive and heavy (the raw material being skin). The books themselves were heavy and inconvenient to use. Therefore, before Gutenberg, the mass distribution of the Bible, as well as any large book, was impossible, at least because of the cost (one Bible likely cost as much as a large hereditary estate). Christianity, of course, possessed its Bibles in major centers; the preparation of the clergy necessarily included knowledge of the text of Scripture. The laity's poor knowledge of the Bible was primarily due to historical mass illiteracy (which would begin to be overcome on a large scale only from the beginning of the 20th century) and not necessarily due to an effort to strictly restrict access to the Bible only to the clergy.

During their mission to the Slavs, the brothers Cyril and Methodius recognized the importance of the written text. The breaking of the trilingual dogma and the subsequent translation of the New Testament, liturgical books, and the Old Testament marked the beginning of the Christianization of the Slavic-speaking world. And their work took root precisely thanks to the work of their disciples in Bulgaria. ³

Thus, up to the beginning of the Renaissance (conventionally), we have as a paradigm the great institution—the Church—which possesses the great Book. The Bible is the **auxiliary** means that comes to communicate the initial historical events of the Faith and to set the pattern of Truth. It is regarded as an inseparable part of the so-called Church Tradition, including the Councils, the Fathers, the Lives of Saints, oral traditions, and inherited rituals. This remains so to this day in the traditional Christian denominations

⁴

. Axiomatically there, the Church space is unified and consistent in its constituent parts. Services are conducted according to rigid rules; the Book itself is always there, bound in gold and elevated in ritual veneration.

The Canon and the Emergence of Textual Criticism

But before the invention of printing, the very physical presentation of the Bible as separate books and sections (the Law – the Prophets – the Psalter – the Gospel – the Acts – the Epistles – Revelation) led it to be conceived as separate parts within Tradition. In the author's opinion,

the question of the Biblical Canon at this time (and perhaps even today) is not argued with sufficient rigor. Textual Criticism would only begin to develop at the beginning of the 17th century – this is the system of hierarchizing textual sources according to criteria of language, chronological origin, territorial origin, scribal tradition, church tradition, reliability, etc., in order to present a maximally basic Greek and Hebrew text (Greek and Hebrew textual criticism have their own specifics [5](#)).

The Renaissance, Differentiation, and the Reformation

The Gradation of Sources during the Renaissance

The advent of the Renaissance [6](#) is characterized by a free view of the world and a striving for education and science. In this freer atmosphere, attention is drawn to the different nature of the components of faith. Namely, the oral part (inherited catechesis + transmitted narratives and rituals), as well as the written. And in the written, a stylistic difference is observed: the style of Scripture is one, that of the Fathers is another (with different style and philosophy), that of the Lives is yet another. This differentiation inevitably leads to gradation, with the written emerging higher, and the highest in the written space naturally being Scripture itself. Another factor contributing to differentiation is the centuries-old interconfessional dialogue, especially with Islam, which was regarded as yet another Christian heresy. That is, on what will we rely to prove our religious claims, and what weight does each have. Thirdly, in the Roman Catholic world, with the increase in education, people dedicated to God find certain papal decisions and Church decrees untenable. And they ask themselves – "if we are to break with the Pope, what can we rely on?"

And to return to Gutenberg: The Bible is now becoming an accessible book: it has a lighter format, is affordable in price, and highly educated people begin to translate it into various languages. The Bible becomes available and surveyable [7](#) .

Alongside the Renaissance interest in refined ancient culture (literature – philosophy – painting – sculpture), the Greek language enjoys increased interest. Hence, the opportunity to read the New Testament in the original. There are ways to learn Old Hebrew as well – Jewish communities are everywhere and, in their conservatism, pass on their sacred heritage through generations. And with a view to the Bible as an independent **subject of faith**, it receives a new reading in its overall unity of mutual interpretation and complementarity.

Wycliffe, Hus, Luther, and the Rise of Sola Scriptura

And from this comes the **amazement** of readers at the difference between the "Biblical world" and the surrounding real religious world. Thus, John Wycliffe (1330-1384, English pre-reformer)

decides to break with the Catholic Church by making the first translation of the Bible into English and basing his sermons on the simple truths of the Gospel, rejecting ritualism. His work is taken up by Jan Hus and the "Czech Brethren." The big nail would, of course, be driven by Martin Luther

⁸. However, examining the early currents of Protestantism, we see a difference in that its pioneers Luther and Melanchthon plead for "clearing the heritage" with the help of Scripture (i.e., to reject church practices only if they contradict Scripture), while with John Calvin (about 20 years after Luther), we already encounter "Sola scriptura" in its fullness – to reject everything not mentioned in the Bible.

The Untenability of Literal Sola Scriptura

But "Sola scriptura" in the literal sense of "only and exclusively Scripture is authoritative" proves to be an untenable approach. Not only because from the very beginning of Protestantism the majority ⁹ adhered to "Prima Scriptura" (that is, "Scripture First," which implies candidates for the other "places"). The most cursory analysis of the New Testament books shows that each of them was written with a specific purpose to a specific audience, not as a spiritual agreement among the chief apostles to compile a foundational corpus of the faith. Luke says at the beginning of his Gospel: "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative... it seemed good to me also...": "Many" here does not mean only three (Matthew-Mark-John). Many accounts were written. And Luke does not necessarily have the idea of confronting them (to criticize them and argue his own point of view as correct), but rather – "it seemed good to me also," just as it seemed good to the other writers.

The Historical Formation of the New Testament Canon

And it is only later, in the 2nd century, that many writings will have been gathered, and the Church will need to, based on its Catechetical experience, sift through many writings according to a strict criterion (the so-called "canonization") ¹⁰. To leave only that which was created to impart stability to the Catechesis itself, following the principle – "This may be read and used in Church practice" and in no way – "This and this alone will define (redefine) Church practice."

Continuity, Rupture, and the Shared Doctrinal Core

The Pitfalls of the "Babylonian Captivity" Narrative

Thus, the historical heritage ¹¹ is fully shared only by the traditional denominations: Catholicism and Orthodoxy insist on their origin from the first Apostles, through the line of succession. Their doctrines and traditions are presented as the "development of the Church through the centuries." They present themselves to the world as the original bearers of Christianity, their institutions as organizations, and as buildings, are ready to instill respect in everyone. Protestant denominations are usually presented as societies or sects that emerged in such-and-such a century, out of nothing. All historicity and continuity are denied them.

Preoccupied with its immediate tasks within the church, the Protestant movement often falls for this trap and paints the period 325 AD (Council of Nicaea) – 1517 AD (Luther's 95 Theses) with a black brush, thinking of it as something like the "Babylonian Captivity of the Church" [12](#). This is mistaken. This period (and also the pre-Nicene period) must be viewed in detail, capturing nuances, not from a high panoramic position. Thus, the emergence of Protestantism (which is nothing other than a movement for elevating Scripture as the primary authority for Faith and filtering the so-called Church Tradition) will be recognized as a long-standing spiritual process, and that Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, etc., are merely links (and perhaps not the largest) in a long chain.

Doctrinal Consensus Across Denominations

Nevertheless, the Reformation's idea is not so much about building as about purifying and restoring what has collapsed. Let us note that the major Christian doctrines, reflected in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, fully coincide across the three denominations:

- 1) Salvation through faith in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, confessing Him as Lord and Savior.
- 2) Salvation as a movement from sinfulness to holiness.
- 3) The Trinity of God.
- 4) Jesus Christ – 100% God and 100% man.
- 5) Jesus Christ – judge of the living and the dead at His Second Coming, etc.

Major Points of Divergence between Traditional and Protestant Praxis

A Catalog of Practices Subject to Scrutiny

The supremacy of Holy Scripture – the Bible – is contested by the traditional denominations, placing it as part of the monolithic Church Tradition. The reasonable Protestant approach to Tradition is to regard it as a historical expression of the Church, which should be under the supervision of Scripture, since it is open in its character and subject to "viral attacks." The total rejection of Tradition, in turn, is a sign of heresy: the key to the interpretation of Scripture is lost, so it can be interpreted solely from some linguistic position (always with claims to complete exegesis), which is a risky approach and breeds heresies. And the correct interpretation of Scripture leads to the fullness of the Christian doctrinal corpus. This provides an approach for assessing the pre-Reformation era.

Looking at Tradition from a dominant Protestant position [13](#) , with the aim of appropriating the "lost/unused heritage," one notices infiltrations that are difficult to define biblically (in the sense of not mentioned or not evident in the Bible). They are

not necessarily

anti-biblical and without a biblical root. The approach to their acceptance or rejection is based on the extent to which they correspond to the "character of Scripture." Here are example descriptors in a general list

[14](#)

:

Veneration of the Mother of God

Towards Mary, in addition to her veneration as equal-to-the-apostles and first among apostles [15](#)

, specific theological attention begins to be directed:

- At the Second and Third Ecumenical Councils, time was devoted to her ontological definition as Theotokos (which is accepted by most Protestants), but later we also have the definition and attributing of:

- her immaculate conception (and somewhere her entire lineage back to Adam)

- Perpetual Virginity [16](#)

- Queen of Heaven, as well as Symbol of the Church and preeminent in its heavenly and earthly

parts.

Veneration of the Saints

Transition from natural respect and striving for imitation of God's followers and martyrs to:

- communion with them as members of the higher (Heavenly) Church
- treating them as additional mediators between God and man
- possessors of powers (energies) and stewards of life's spheres, by analogy with appointing a ministerial cabinet by a prime minister.

Veneration of Icons and Statues

Shift in the attitude towards images from their decorative function (an expression of permissible deviation from the second commandment) to:

- objects of worship.
- icon (liturgical) processions.
- assigning a proper existence to icons – self-painting, independent journeys, miracle-working.

Infant Baptism

- proxy baptism of the infant (through a godparent, who confesses on behalf of the infant).
- baptism not only as confirmation of Repentance and turning to God, but also – as initiation into

the Church and redemption from Original Sin.

Prayers for the Dead, Purgatory, and the Soul's Journey

Prayers for the dead. Purgatory. Wandering of the soul after death.

Shift in Monastic Emphasis

Shift of emphasis in monasticism from "go into the world" to self-contemplative cultivation of virtues.

Clergy □ Laity Division and Titular Honours

Strict division between clergy and laity. Uniforms for the clergy and monks. "Father" for addressing and titling. "Saint" for titular assessment of a life of complete righteousness.

Liturgical Symbolism and Rituals

Construction of liturgical symbolism "looking back to Jesus" (in analogy to the Old Testament "looking forward to Jesus"). Rituals (incense, processions, sacrifices, vows, strictly leavened/unleavened bread for communion, holy water). Indulgences in one form or another.

Veneration of Relics and Holy Objects

Veneration of dead bodies and their parts ("relics"). Veneration of New Testament realities – the Grail, fragments of the Cross, garments and personal belongings of saints, etc.

Church as Temple

Church = Temple (and not the "assembly of believers").

Pilgrimages

Pilgrimage travel. [17](#)

Ancient Liturgical Languages

Use of ancient (and unintelligible to the majority) language in divine services for reasons of

sacredness. (Church Slavonic – Russia, Old Bulgarian – Bulgaria, Katharevousa – Greece (instead of "Dimotiki"), Latin – throughout Catholicism, Ge'ez – Ethiopia (instead of Amharic), etc.) [18](#) .

This list is open; in any case, some things have been omitted [19](#) .

Conlusuion: Toward an Honest Theological Dialogue and Doctrinal Reassessment

A Call for Non- Arrogant Analysis

This is not a criticism of Protestantism towards the traditional denominations; these things are indeed not noticeable at least at first glance in the Scriptures, and for many of them, there are obvious counter-arguments. So, it is not a correct approach on the part of the Traditional denominations to **arrogantly** (and lazily?) avoid analyses, discussions, and answers on these issues. (A kind of – "Because salvation and truth are only with us anyway, and if someone has decided not to agree with this, that is their own concern"). On the contrary, with sufficiently good justification for the mentioned practices, we would have guaranteed Church unity.

A Fourfold Framework for Justifying Practices

It should include:

- 1) Historical analysis, when the practice in question was introduced. Sources.
- 2) Spiritual justification, **why** this was necessary.
- 3) What implications we have from the Scriptures.
- 4) To what extent the practice in question is considered obligatory and what are the consequences of its neglect or denial.

The answers should come from as high a tribune as possible, and not as private opinions.

The Call for Sincere Scholarship and Ecumenical Openness

Let this be a challenge for the Orthodox theologian, and also let the Protestant theologian have an open conscience when discovering evidence in the "traditional" direction in his own research, and let all avoid throwing around "evidence" of which they themselves are not sure. Through sincere effort, the Orthodox theologian can influence at least a billion-strong Church community, such as Protestantism, towards the "right path" in which he himself is confident.

This sincere attitude (without a lack of zealotry/fanaticism ²⁰ : i.e., meaning readiness and courage for concession from one's own views) can lead to the conclusion that points 1) 2) 3) 4) cannot be reasonably answered. This would require

rethinking and correction

of centuries-old practices. Which is not the worst thing:

After all, it is God's word that "endures forever." That is – more than all other things on this earth.

Notes:

¹ Boris Akunin, IRG Vol. III. From Ivan III to Boris Godunov. Between Asia and Europe; <http://iamruss.ru/ivan-iii-the-great-and-his-greatrussian-state/>

² In the article, "Church" refers to the community of believing Christians, regardless of specific denomination.

³ There is no definitive evidence that Cyril and Methodius succeeded in translating the entire biblical corpus. The first certain biblical compilation in the Slavic world is the work of Novgorod Archbishop Gennady (1499), during the reign of the aforementioned Tsar Ivan III. He maintained friendly relations with Rome and there specified the Canon of the Bible (which means that for exactly five centuries from the baptism of Rus' until his time, the Canon was not discussed), and he himself was engaged in collecting and cataloging available books from monasteries and churches. Because certain books were not found, a quick (low-quality) translation was made from Latin and German (Gutenberg!), since Greek was not popular and known in Russia at that time. - <https://days.pravoslavie.ru/Life/life3064.htm> ; https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Gennadij_Novgorodskij/

;

<http://www.pravenc.ru/text/162054.html>

4 By "traditional denominations" or confessions, Orthodoxy and Catholicism are meant; with the clear understanding that these are two confessions with differences and that the list at the end of the article is some kind of union, including things from "both sides."

5 Kurt Aland, Barbara Aland: The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism; Emanuel Tov: Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible.

6 One of the engines of the Renaissance was the wealthy and powerful Republic of Venice. At the end of the 15th century, it inspired colossal respect, and among its population, scientific and artistic education was much more widespread than among all other European nations. Trade and industry flourished. Even the common people grew rich because taxes were low and the government was non-despotic. Only for cases of political crimes in 1539, three state inquisitors were appointed. (Wikipedia).

7 The problem of historical differentiation and gradation of sources requires a much more in-depth analysis. For example, the question is interesting as to why Cyril and Methodius, two obvious men of God, did not arrive at the idea of differentiation. One explanation is that having education in philosophy and rhetoric (with all their speculative apparatus) and having been engaged in the fight against paganism and Islam from a very early age, it was unthinkable for them to question even to themselves established Church practices.

8 Reference to the list of 95 theses he nailed to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral, as well as his relentless position to elevate Scripture as the supreme authority of faith, which caused a schism in the Catholic world and upheaval in Western Europe.

9 For example https://rado76.wordpress.com/2017/11/15/reformation-conference/?fbclid=IwAR1EOgH8naFCxVmtZ0tj_wq6Yp3xu8NI2k5PzPIr6M5dQ0wpmr28R2SyC8w

10 Historically, the first canonization belongs to Irenaeus of Lyons, who lived ~130 – 202 AD.

11 In the article, "historical heritage" refers to the aforementioned markers of Church experience (excluding the books of the Bible): **the fathers + lives + transmitted through generations testimonies and rituals**, etc., the best visible expressions of which are historical and systematic (dogmatic) theology, the works of the Church Teachers, and established Church practices for Divine Service and Worship.

12 In his book of the same name, Martin Luther criticizes some of the Sacraments in the Catholic Church and elevates the idea of "human ordinances," as opposed to supposedly Biblical argumentation, but thus, under such criticism, falls every Church activity without strictly primary Biblical argumentation.

13 Some abstract (virtual) general Protestant position is meant (based, for example, on the majority), because Protestantism itself is difficult to define and has unclear boundaries. It can certainly be thought of as the heir of the Reformation and confessing the five "solas." However, movements such as the "Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism)," "Jehovah's Witnesses," as well as certain branches of Adventism or Judeo-Christianity, are difficult to fit within it.

14 In the gradations indicated in the individual sub-points, an increasing Protestant gradient of non-acceptance can be observed.

15 See for example <https://rado76.wordpress.com/2015/03/28/mary-8/#more-8676>

16 I.e., the eternal virginity of Mariam: before, during, and after the birth of the Son of God.

17 As a curious case, let us say something about the famous pilgrimage route "Camino" in Northern Spain. It rests on ancient legends and popularizations by modern fiction writers. As the third most popular in the Catholic world, it welcomes over 100,000 travelers annually (according to Wikipedia). In general, the legend is of late origin and contradicts the New Testament: It is

very difficult to accept that James the son of Zebedee, within about 10 years (from the time of the Church's birth), managed to reach the western end of Spain, preach Christianity there, this long journey leaving no traces anywhere, and then return to Jerusalem, where he perished at the hands of King Herod (the next with this name – his wrath upon the Church was due to its massive initial success among the Gentiles – Acts chapter 11). And then Paul (Romans 15:20-24) speaks of his dream to visit Spain, as a continuation of his ambitious credo to preach Christ in places where no one has gone before him.

[18](#) The use of Old Bulgarian in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church contradicts the work of Cyril and Methodius: why would they need to adapt the Divine Service to the spoken Slavic (Bulgarian) language if they could have continued in the original and sublime Greek. And any layperson interested in the content – let them ask and educate themselves. They could have easily continued with "Kyrie eleison" instead of changing it to "Gospodi pomilui." And the latter invites modernization, for example with: "Lord, have mercy on me."

[19](#) Practices that can be seen as the development of the Church include:

- Calendar of veneration (when days are connected to names and events);
- Standardized (calendar-based – horologion, communion, event-based – birth/baptism/wedding/funeral) services with reading of fixed texts. Use of euchologions (detailed descriptors of services);
- Limitation of prayers with free text;
- Technologies for creating icons (e.g., "reverse perspective");
- Emergence and development of monasticism;
- Production, trade, and use of items of monastic handicrafts (cross-amulets, icons, foods, medicines, woodcarving, etc.);

- State religions;
- Confession only before a minister of a certain rank;
- Use of the sign of the cross;
- Channeling of praise music.

All these elements can receive historical justification; some of them accompany the Church from its very beginning. Which does not prevent them from being similarly analyzed alongside the above list of 12 points.

[20](#) That is, a preliminary attitude to defend one's position regardless of the means, as a counterbalance to a conscientious search for truth, which may turn out to be at odds with one's own previous views.

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