



INVENTING AUTHORITY

The Use of the Church Fathers
in Reformation Debates over the Eucharist

ESTHER CHUNG-KIM

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To my husband, Steven

“Although the fathers did not hold to a bad opinion, they were not able to say sufficiently clearly what they wanted to say.”

“Although the more learned fathers teach us something, nevertheless one must judge them according to the Word of God.”

—Philip Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 1540



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Introduction



Reformation of the Ancient Tradition *Interpreting the Fathers in the Eucharistic Debates*

Any notion of the Protestant Reformation as a religiously homogeneous, anti-establishment, anti-tradition movement is too simplistic. While the Protestant reformers' conception of *sola scriptura* established the Bible as the primary standard authorizing Christian theology and practice, they did not conceive of rejecting wholesale the history of the church's tradition. In fact, many reformers considered the early church fathers secondary authorities to Scripture as well as important teachers of biblical interpretation. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants found themselves needing to use authorities in the context of formal argumentation as a means of proving theological truth.¹ Although the reformers cited the ancient Christian writers initially against the scholastic writers of the late medieval and early modern Catholic Church, the fathers quickly became tools of criticism within Protestant circles. The debates among Protestants demonstrated their willingness to wrestle with ancient writings, not to eradicate tradition but to reinterpret it in such a way as to claim it as their inheritance.

Because the concentration of patristic references was highest in polemical writings, an examination of reformers' use of the church fathers ought to take into account those places where references appear most frequently. In the midst of polemical debates when the weight of consensus was lacking, reformers recalled the patristic sources to serve as subsidiary authorities under Scripture. These ancient Christian writers were initially considered helpful authorities because they (especially Augustine) were seen as reliable interpreters of Scripture. As exemplary scriptural exegetes, they were the means of demonstrating the correct understanding of Scripture and

therefore correct theology. References to the fathers became a way to substantiate one's own reading of Scripture or to reject an opponent's interpretation.

One notable place in which the fathers figured heavily was the controversy over the Lord's Supper, not simply between Catholics and Protestants, but also among the Protestants themselves. Reformers were not willing to give up the ancient authorities easily because, as challengers to the standard orthodoxy, they needed to reinterpret the church's past and construct a "new" ancient tradition. What was at stake in the Reformation conflicts over the Eucharist was not a binary distinction between what is Catholic versus what is Protestant, but a definition of Christian orthodoxy that divided Protestant nations, towns, and families. In continental Europe, Protestant groups, particularly Lutherans and Calvinists (Reformed), developed alongside one another, sometimes in cooperation or coexistence and at other times in conflict.

This book examines three sixteenth-century Lutheran and Reformed debates over the Lord's Supper and the use of the fathers in these controversies. On the one hand, references to the ancient fathers are nothing new, since the medieval church had based its tradition on their works for centuries, and many Protestant reformers had first learned of the church fathers while they were still Catholics. On the other hand, the desire for change precipitated a reevaluation of the present. Against the backdrop of Renaissance humanist training, which prized antiquity, looking back to the time of the early church fathers (when Scripture alone was not conclusive) gave reformers a starting place to rewrite, or at least reinterpret, history and to present a tradition that supported new theological views.

Recent Scholarship

Scholars have generally recognized the work of humanists in providing increased accessibility to early Christian sources and fueling interest in them. Yet what kind of value did the ancient fathers hold for the Protestant reformers and why were the fathers most often recalled in the midst of polemical debates? While the interest in patristic sources was not new, some ancient Christian writers were being recalled in a new way—to provide ancestral roots to an emerging Protestant tradition. Medieval thinkers had also cited the church fathers, and many Protestant reformers were first exposed to the fathers through medieval sources, such as canon law or Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. Gordon Rupp points out that, although the authority of Scripture is primary for the reformers, the appeal to the "old Fathers" is of genuine importance and "the typical scholarly work of

the 16th century is peppered with classical allusions and garnished with patristic quotations.”² For years scholars have discussed the significance of the fathers for the Reformation, and many recent studies have focused on a specific reformer’s use of the fathers. A few books in this field have also tried to capture an array of scholarly perspectives on the issue by compiling various writers in anthologies or collections of essays. These works offer a menu of topics related to the use of the fathers during the Reformation. One such collection, edited by Leif Grane, Alfred Schindler, and Markus Wriedt, is *Auctoritas Patrum: Zur Rezeption der Kirchenwäter im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert* (1993); it was followed by a companion volume, *Auctoritas Patrum II: Neue Beiträge zur Rezeption der Kirchenwäter im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert* (1998). The essays in the *Auctoritas Patrum* series are usually focused on a particular reformer, one church father, or the examination of one event, such as the 1518–1519 Leipzig Disputation. While these essays are presented in a roughly chronological order, they only provide cursory vignettes of the reformers’ use of the fathers, without making any connections between them, although Leif Grane’s essay on the church fathers in the first years of the Reformation (1516–1520) shows an effort at synthesis for the early period of the Reformation.

Another work, *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West* (1997), edited by Irena Backus, contains the work of a variety of authors and covers the role of the church fathers from the eighth-century Carolingian Renaissance to the early eighteenth century, although the essays are not necessarily related in theme or method and are of varying depth. Resulting from conference contributions, *Die Patristik in der Bibellexege des 16. Jahrhunderts* (1999), edited by David Steinmetz, focuses on the sixteenth-century interest in the biblical exegesis of the fathers. The most recent volume edited by Günter Frank, Thomas Leinkauf, and Markus Wriedt, titled *Die Patristik in der Frühen Neuzeit: Die Relektüre der Kirchenwäter in den Wissenschaften des 15. bis 18. Jahrhunderts* (2006) offers a range of contributions in German, English, French, and Italian based on an international conference in 2003 and demonstrates the need for further analysis and synthesis of the Reformation usage of the patristic tradition. Some recent works have offered a synthesis of the patristic scholarship among specific Protestant reformers such as Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, Bucer, and Zwingli. This study approaches the use of the fathers during the Reformation through a comparative analysis of how several key Lutheran and Reformed thinkers used the fathers in their debates over the Eucharist. Looking at the patristic tradition in this way provides a broader perspective because the eucharistic controversies spanned most of the sixteenth century and progressively elicited an increasing number of church fathers

in the ongoing debates. On the one hand, addressing the patristic scholarship of the Reformation on a broad spectrum would be impossible for any one study to undertake. On the other hand, this book focuses on the use of the fathers in the context of the eucharistic controversies as a window to understanding patterns and strategies for citing the fathers in sixteenth century polemics, an arena where the fathers surfaced most often.

Of the recent monographs published relating to this topic, three of the most helpful have been Anthony Lane's *Calvin, Student of the Church Fathers* (neatly summarized into eleven theses), Irena Backus' *Historical Method and Confessional Identity in the Era of the Reformation*, and Nicholas Thompson's work on the *Eucharistic Sacrifice and Patristic Tradition in the Theology of Martin Bucer*. Lane's work is a good example of an isolated study on a single reformer's use of the fathers.³ Lane recognizes that Calvin's references to the fathers occur most frequently in his polemical writings and cover Calvin's debate with Albert Pighius on free will and providence. Backus carefully examines the Reformation methods of employing historical sources. Thompson explains the notions of eucharistic sacrifice in the Reformation and points out that both Catholic and Protestant thinkers who looked back to fathers such as Augustine, Jerome, Chrysostom, and Basil were involved in the polemics over the ownership of these ancient authorities.⁴ As Steinmetz, Kolb, and Lane have noted, the reformers' use of the fathers does not presuppose a modern scholar's access to volumes of ancient Christian writers.⁵ Therefore the historical questions surrounding sixteenth-century patristic usage are not so much focused on whether the reformers correctly portray the early church fathers based on all the writings that are now accessible to the modern scholar, but instead focus on how the reformers interpret the early church fathers—and more broadly, how they receive, understand, and transmit tradition.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, a great interest in early Christianity was bound to be present among German biblical humanists. With their background in classical culture, the writings of the fathers were considered to be "good literature." The fact that the fathers were close in time to the Holy Scriptures carried weight. For both reasons, the church fathers came to be instruments in the criticism of "sophistry and speculation."⁶ In the early part of the sixteenth century, reformers turned to the fathers in order to counterbalance scholastic doctors. The resurgent patristic interest was part of a criticism of tradition with the intention to serve the reform of the church and the renewal of studies.⁷ The enthusiasm for the fathers, especially at the beginning of the Reformation, contributed to the sense that these ancient sources were treasures to be rediscovered. The advent of the printing press assisted in

the production of an increased quantity of complete editions of patristic texts, as well as patristic anthologies.⁸ For example, Jacques Le Fèvre published the writings of John of Damascus, Athenagoras, Hermas as well as a text of the Clementine Homilies, while the German humanist Beatus Rhenanus offered translations of Gregory of Nyssa, Basil, and the *editio princeps* of Tertullian (1521). Meanwhile, Erasmus was associated with editions of Jerome (1516), Cyprian (1520), Arnobius (1522), Hilary (1523), Irenaeus (Lat. 1526), Ambrose (1527), Augustine (1528), Chrysostom (Lat. 1530–1531), Basil (Gk. 1532), and Origen (1536).⁹ By the middle of the century this unprecedented availability of patristic material gave a new edge to the appeal to primitive Christianity.¹⁰ Like many reformers in the earliest years of the Reformation, Philip Melancthon (1497–1560) understood that the church fathers were of a higher order than the scholastic doctors, and that to praise them was the same as listening to Erasmus, Reuchlin, and Luther.¹¹ In other words, sixteenth-century reformers posited the church fathers as “better” human authorities than the late medieval scholars and claimed this ancient authority to challenge the existing religious powers.¹²

From the earliest debates with the Roman Catholic thinkers, Protestant reformers determined whether a church father was “theologically sound” or “mistaken and misled,” like their opponents. Philip Melancthon in his letter to Oecolampadius expressed doubt about some of John Eck’s quotations of Jerome and Cyprian.¹³ Melancthon simply states that the better informed fathers were on Luther’s side, while Eck could only adduce those who were misusing the biblical texts. Since humanist scholars had taken up the work of translating the fathers with new fervor, Catholics and Protestants alike scrambled to claim the inheritance of the rediscovered ancient sources. Regardless of Catholic or Protestant views, it was a sign of the times that anyone who sought change in the church would look back to its history to reevaluate its beliefs and practices. For example, in a letter of December 6, 1518, to Zwingli in Zürich, Rhenanus expresses annoyance with priests who burdened the people with superfluous ceremonies. He claims that Zwingli and his supporters, however, were the exceptions who, in contrast to the majority, advanced the purest philosophy of Christ directly from the sources, drawn from Augustine, Ambrose, Cyprian, and Jerome.¹⁴ Zwingli in his own letter states that to be a good theologian means to study the Scripture, Origen, Cyprian, Jerome, and the like.¹⁵ When divisions among Protestant groups arose, their appeals to the early church fathers continued as Lutheran and Reformed writers strove to identify themselves with the reputation of the “good” fathers.

In 1539 Calvin argued in his *Reply to Sadoleto* that the Reformation was a movement in line with the ancient church. To envision Calvin's use of the fathers, one must suspend the modern notion of the scholarly exercise of reading tomes of the church fathers as sources of direct citation. While Calvin very well may have engaged in this scholarly effort, especially in his later writings, he also relied on other intermediaries as a means of accessing the fathers, including the ones he may never have read firsthand. It is generally accepted that Calvin's references to and citations of the church fathers not only emerged from direct readings but were also filtered through other authors such as Luther, Erasmus, and Bucer, and sometimes even through his opponents, such as Pighius and Westphal. At times, Calvin had the writings of the church fathers, most often Augustine, in front of him, and on other occasions, he quoted from memory as he wrote.¹⁶ In some cases, there is no evidence that Calvin directly read the original sources. In addition to quotations from memory of an earlier reading, there is the possibility of an anthology in which Calvin may have kept a log of quotations as Bucer and Melanchthon did,¹⁷ but no evidence of such a collection has yet been found. Clearly Calvin's use of the fathers extended beyond his explicit references to them, as he incorporated many of their views into his own system of belief. In his own day, Calvin initially received invitations to religious colloquies because of his knowledge of the fathers.¹⁸ He utilized patristic scholarship increasingly, as he had access to editions of the church fathers in his gradually expanding library and he claimed the church fathers as a source of religious authority in the controversial subject of the Lord's Supper.

Debates over the Eucharist

Debates over the Eucharist were not simply about the technical details of performing the sacrament of the altar, but included a complex interplay between received tradition and theology, Renaissance philosophy and philology, pastoral care and liturgy, and the social, political, and economic culture of the late medieval and early modern period. In addition to issues of Scripture and tradition, sacramental theology addressed Trinitarian and christological dogmas of the early church councils, patristic works against ancient "heretics," and the medieval appropriation of the church fathers.¹⁹ In contentions over the Lord's Supper, appeals to the fathers emerged in the words of reformers ranging from a doctor of theology such as Martin Luther to laypersons such as the English martyr John Lambert.²⁰ The early Protestants criticized the late medieval views of the Eucharist as a sacrifice offered by the priest to God, the doctrine of transubstantiation and the doctrine of concomitance, which justified

the withholding of the consecrated wine from laypeople.²¹ Luther argued that the Eucharist was not a sacrifice, but rather a testament of something that God does. He also rejected the Aristotelian concept of transubstantiation and insisted that both of the elements ought to be distributed to lay believers following Christ's institution.

In 1521 Wittenberg theologians considered how their new theological insights would change church practices, specifically the Mass. In the absence of Luther (who was hiding at the Wartburg Castle and would return in March 1522), Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt initiated a Protestant "evangelical" form of worship on December 25, 1521. Dressed in everyday clothes rather than the proper ceremonial vestments, Karlstadt presented the eucharistic liturgy in the vernacular, omitting any notions of sacrifice, and served Communion under both species, meaning both the bread and the consecrated wine were given to the laity, instead of just the bread. Subsequent disagreements between Luther and Karlstadt led to Karlstadt's leaving Wittenberg and temporarily rejecting an academic career in 1523. Meanwhile, the Zürich reformer Ulrich Zwingli moved toward abolishing the mass and instituting a reformed Communion service. Influenced by Cornelius Hoen, Zwingli argued for a spiritual understanding of the Lord's Supper, according to which Christ was present in spirit, not in the elements but among the congregation. From 1524 to 1525, Zwingli and Johannes Oecolampadius published writings that challenged Luther's view of the Eucharist, prompting a string of responses from Luther. In 1529 Landgrave Philip of Hesse arranged the Marburg Colloquy in hopes of achieving a political alliance among Protestants against the Catholic powers of Emperor Charles V. In order to achieve such an alliance, a common united front, based on a theological consensus among Protestant groups, was sought. Apparently, agreement was reached on fourteen of the fifteen articles under discussion, but participants in the colloquy failed to reach an agreement on issues relating to the Eucharist. The Lutheran and Reformed sides set the stage for the recurring controversy over the Eucharist. Because both sides appealed to the early church fathers in their argumentation, the issue of ancient authorities would continue to arise in subsequent eucharistic debates.

Against the backdrop of the humanist-scholastic duels of the late fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century, the number of references to patristic writers is not surprising. Luther and early Protestants appealed to the early church fathers as exemplars of an alternative tradition to what they perceived as the maladies of the late medieval church. Therefore one would expect the church fathers to be marshaled mostly against the Roman Catholics; yet the appeals to the ancient fathers

increased dramatically in the polemics among Protestants. In the end, the divisive controversy over the Lord's Supper prevented agreement over the formation of a Protestant political alliance. Eventually the theological decisions made at the Marburg Colloquy resulted in not only religious, but also political divisions. By examining the use of the fathers at Marburg, we can see the role that references to the church fathers had in argumentation over biblical interpretation. For example, Luther claimed that the Swiss thinkers had Augustine and Fulgentius but that the rest of the fathers belonged to the Lutherans. Later reformers continued the practice of dividing up the fathers as had been done at the Colloquy of Marburg. In the second eucharistic controversy of the 1550s, this time between Calvin and the Gnesio-Lutherans, the practice of dividing up the pool of fathers between the two sides of the debate was abandoned and was replaced by the practice of vying over the same father(s). While reformers initially cited the fathers against scholastic writers, the fathers soon became tools of criticism against other Protestant reformers as well.

This book traces the development of Lutheran and Reformed polemics over the Eucharist and the use of the fathers as a source of authority in these debates. Despite the interest in the role of the fathers in the sixteenth century, few have ventured to examine the use of the fathers over the span of the sixteenth century, through three generations of reformers. The scope of this study is confined to an examination of the recurring controversy over the Eucharist, and traces the development of the use of the fathers in this one key polemical issue, beginning with the role of the fathers at the Marburg Colloquy, essentially the first Protestant eucharistic controversy.²² The story of this conflict does not end with Marburg but continues in the Lutheran-Reformed debates of the 1550s, exemplified in Calvin's debates with Joachim Westphal and, later, Tilemann Hesshusen. When Calvin died, his successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza, defended the Reformed use of the fathers against Jacob Andreae, champion of Lutheran orthodoxy at the Colloquy of Montbéliard in 1586.

Authorizing Interpretations in a Competitive Arena

When approaching the problem of authority, it is helpful to look at what sources the reformers appealed to—whether Scripture, reason, early church fathers, medieval tradition, or contemporary thinkers—when they made theological or religious assertions.²³ In the polemical argumentation over the Eucharist, the use of the fathers fell within the scope of the broader question concerning authority, namely the establishment of doctrine and practice in the name of “orthodoxy.” The fact that the critical issue at the Council of Trent was the nature and source of authority concerning

Scripture and tradition is an indication that determining who had legitimate authority was the critical question of the age. The eucharistic debate of the 1520s, which led to the Marburg Colloquy, is a perfect example of how theological pluralism was accompanied by a total intolerance of other points of view.²⁴ The eucharistic debates demonstrated a diversity of theological views (as subsequent chapters will illustrate) that embodied what one thought not only about Scripture and tradition but also about incarnation, Christology, soteriology, eschatology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology. The northern Lutherans and the southern Zwinglians could agree on various points of theology and could conceive of a political Protestant league, but they could not agree on the theological meaning of “is” in the words “this is my body.” Initially, the fathers were a necessary component of a Protestant strategy for historical validation against the established church. Eventually, the fathers became necessary for validating particular Protestant traditions as the Reformed and Lutheran sides of the conflict employed the fathers against each other. Thompson named this kind of appropriation, “magisterial,” since it appealed to the authority and succession of the church’s teaching ministry alongside the Scripture, but under the authority of the Word and the Spirit.²⁵ On one level, the church fathers were tools for the purpose of persuasion; on another level, they were seen as building blocks to an emerging Protestant tradition whose foundation was based on the authority of Scripture.

In the midst of interrelated political and religious processes, the ongoing theological divisions over doctrines, such as the Lord’s Supper led to the development of distinct theological identities, even though the confessional situation between the 1550s and the 1580s was extremely fluid. Even in Münster, with its memory of Anabaptist millenarian revolution, Lutherans and Catholics coexisted peacefully until the 1580s. In the period from the 1580s to the outbreak of the Thirty Years’ War, rapid confessionalization seemed to occur on all three fronts,²⁶ although to varying degrees. The debates over the Eucharist between Lutheran and Reformed leaders in the second half of the sixteenth century contributed to the confessionalizing tendencies in western Europe, where individuals, communities, and states began to adopt religious confessional identities along at least three confessional lines: Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist/Reformed.²⁷ Since the Colloquy of Montbéliard (chap. 7) occurred in this period, the entrenchment of the confessional identities affected in the debates between Beza and Andreae, in which both men delineated a greater number of disagreements than before and refused to acknowledge each other as Christian brethren.

In expounding their views, reformers appealed to Scripture and the church fathers. The extent to which they appealed to the writings of the fathers depended on the extent to which they could utilize the ancient writings to support their own views or dismiss those of their opponents. As a result, when Lutheran and Reformed writers disagreed on a point, they not only divided up the fathers by naming only those considered supportive of their views, but they also addressed those sayings of the fathers that seemed to contradict their views. In the work of reclaiming the church fathers, the reformers had to address the ancient writings that could be seen as liabilities.

The reformers' typical attitude toward the fathers can be summarized in an excerpt from Wolfgang Musculus (1497–1563), a reformer in the cities of Augsburg and Bern. Musculus explained several reasons for reading the fathers, namely (1) to understand the meaning of difficult passages in the Bible; (2) to recognize the teachings of the ancient heretics; and (3) to establish godly living.²⁸ The reformers' use of the fathers applied to these three purposes in varying degrees. In polemical argumentation the first two purposes emerge more frequently than the third. Despite his immense respect for the fathers, Musculus reasons that "the fathers' opinions have *weight* because of their erudite scholarship and because of the sanctity of their lives, but their views do not have *authority* per se."²⁹ Such a view reflects the general perspective of the Protestant reformers, for whom the fathers were neither infallible nor final authorities; they were given the weight of authority as long as they were considered helpful in explicating the meaning of Scripture. Beyond exhibiting literary erudition, the reformers turned to the church fathers to reinterpret the history of the church. By reinterpreting the church fathers, they were creating a "new" ancient tradition, one that would give Protestant doctrine a past.

The primary reason for escalating conflicts between confessions claiming to represent true Christianity was the problem of authority. Although both Lutheran and Reformed thinkers in the sixteenth century believed that there was an authoritative source of religious truth and even agreed that it was the Word of God, they disagreed in their interpretations, and thereby exacerbated the unsolved problem of authority.³⁰ In making a sharp distinction between divine and human words and by locating the primary authority in the Scriptures, Luther denied the teaching authority of the church³¹ and consistently reminded his opponents that Scripture stood above the church fathers. Oecolampadius, meanwhile, found support in the early church fathers for creating a greater distance from the late medieval views of the Eucharist. For him, the fathers were part of a struggle to uphold a newly developing doctrine