

## CHAPTER 1

# The Consensus Patrum

## AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

*In the catholic church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. For that is truly and properly universal, which, as the name itself and the reason of the thing declare, comprehends all universally.*

Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitory*, 2.6.

## INTRODUCTION

Theologians throughout the centuries have long considered the notion of the existence of some sort of consensual tradition existing amongst the church fathers. From the earliest centuries, The Fathers themselves sought to prove that their theological views were in line with antiquity.<sup>1</sup> Tertullian pointed to the Rule of Faith.<sup>2</sup> Basil the Great referred to an “unwritten tradition.”<sup>3</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria defended the doctrine of the Trinity as “preserved by The Fathers.”<sup>4</sup> Eventually, the church began to formulate

1. For example, when they tried to prove the connection between Plato and Moses in order to prove the antiquity of their theology. See Justin Martyr, *1 Apology*, 59.

2. Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 4.2.1.

3. Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 27.

4. Athanasius, *Letters on the Holy Spirit*, 1.28.

creeds to encapsulate their view.<sup>5</sup> Then, in their polemics, The Fathers began to compile *florigelium* in their works, in order to portray their viewpoint as in line with the *Consensus Patrum*.<sup>6</sup> Finally, upon the dawn of the Reformation in the Western church, the Reformers sought to prove that they were in line with The Fathers and that the medieval Catholics were not.<sup>7</sup>

By the time of the Reformation Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants each viewed themselves as the community truly faithful to the classic patristic tradition. Accordingly, each group viewed The Fathers through the lens that they were the faithful continuation of the early church and read the patristic tradition in light of their current ecclesiastical situation, viewing their community as the faithful continuation of ancient Christianity. The Eastern churches tended to read the *Consensus Patrum* through the developments in Byzantine theology (especially Gregory Palamas). The Western churches, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, tended to emphasize Augustinian theological themes. Whereas the Protestant communities have continued emphasizing Augustine, the Roman Catholics filter Augustine through Aquinas.

This approach continued in Protestantism following the Reformation until nineteenth-century Protestant liberal theology.<sup>8</sup> Following the time of Protestant liberalism, Protestants, whether liberal or evangelical, tended towards the view propagated by liberalism: that Protestantism bypassed the patristic era and returned to true, biblical Christianity. The ensuing neglect

5. As Williams puts it: "While the ancient Christians always regarded the past with esteem, one can point to an increasing number of instances in the late fifth and sixth centuries when writers thought of the earlier fathers as privileged witnesses to Christian truth." See Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition*, 50.

6. These were lists of patristic sayings in support of their viewpoint. See Louth, *St John Damascene*, 14f. Louth notes that they first were used leading up to the Council of Chalcedon. Eventually, *florigelium* were used by The Fathers in polemics in instances such as the *filioque* debate.

7. See Lane, *John Calvin*, 3; Oort, "John Calvin" 697–99. Indeed, as one scholar aptly puts it: "In the controversies that followed the Reformation, Catholic and Protestant scholasticism took on a more polemical edge, coloring their development of theology's rational conclusions by their needs to defend respective ecclesial positions. Catholic theology stressed the structures and role of church authority, and the legitimacy of practices and beliefs lacking obvious roots in scripture; Protestant scholasticism stressed the primacy of the Word of God in church organization and worship, and distanced itself from any aspects of Catholic teaching lacking biblical warrant." See Flynn and Murray, *Ressourcement*, 335.

8. Though, as Fairbairn argues, even the liberals (e.g., Harnack) had a lens through which they read The Fathers. See Fairbairn, "Patristic Soteriology," 290–93. As shall be explored below, the liberal approach often assumed the lens that the Protestant church faithfully and rightly *bypassed* the patristic era returning to a better, more biblical Christianity.

of not only patristic scholarship but also allowing The Fathers to undergird dogmatic theology was a denial of the way of the Reformers and it opened the door towards twentieth-century Protestant “retrievals” of The Fathers.<sup>9</sup> Torrance, a Protestant in the Reformed and evangelical tradition, has much to offer as an excellent example of a largely successful retrieval.

This chapter will explore the different approaches to the *Consensus Patrum* within historical Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism by looking at the vision of various figures and their ideas in order to put Torrance’s project in its historical and ecclesiastical context. The most detailed analysis will be upon Protestantism because Torrance emerged out of this group and, indeed, was most faithful to the Protestant, especially Reformed and evangelical, approach to The Fathers. This chapter will argue that each group had its own lens through which they viewed The Fathers. The conclusion will be that Torrance’s notion of the *consensus* and the lens through which he views it emerges out of his own Protestant tradition, sharing many core traits and convictions with it, although there are substantial points of contact between Torrance and other figures as well.

## THE *CONSENSUS PATRUM* IN ROMAN CATHOLICISM

There have been a variety of components contributing to Roman Catholic readings of the *consensus*. However, three fundamentals have dominated their reading throughout history: (1) their conception of the *consensus* as quantitative, (2) their tendency to interpret The Fathers through Augustine and, eventually, Thomas Aquinas, and (3) their conception of the *consensus* as developing.

In the theology of Counter-Reformation, Roman Catholicism turned to the famous adage of Vincent of Lérins that:

In the catholic church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere (*ubique*), always (*semper*), by all (*ab omnibus*). For that is truly (*vere*) and properly (*proprieque*) universal (*catholicum*), which, as the name itself and the reason of the thing declare, comprehends all universally. This rule we shall observe if we follow universality, antiquity, consent. We shall follow universality if we confess that one faith to be true, which the whole church throughout the world confesses; antiquity, if we in no wise depart from those interpretations which it is manifest were notoriously held by

9. “Theologies of retrieval” is John Webster’s term. See Webster, “Theologies of Retrieval,” 584–99.

our holy ancestors and fathers; consent, in like manner, if in antiquity itself we adhere to the consentient definitions and determinations of all, or at the least of almost all priests and doctors.<sup>10</sup>

For the Roman Catholics, the key to Vincent's credo is in the statement's first sentence, "everywhere, always, and by all." To Roman Catholics of the Counter-Reformation this implied a numerical *consensus*. Roman Catholics of this era maintained that individually The Fathers could err but taken as a whole they were authoritative and even infallible.<sup>11</sup> Thus, unanimity was greatly stressed.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, only the teaching of The Fathers as a whole was considered to be authoritative.<sup>13</sup>

Francis Turretin, hailing from the Reformed tradition, provides a witness to this numerical emphasis historically. Turretin lists three opinions that the Roman Catholics of his time held concerning the authority of The Fathers: (1) their writings are equal to Scripture both individually and collectively, (2) their writings are merely human, and (3) individually The Fathers are fallible but collectively they are infallible.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, according to Turretin, the council of Trent asserts "the traditions of The Fathers pertaining both to faith and practice must be received with equal affection of piety with the Old and New Testaments."<sup>15</sup> Turretin sees the majority of the Catholics of his time contending that the collective teaching of The Fathers was as authoritative as the Scriptures. Thus, at least according to certain of their opponents, in their Counter-Reformation polemics the Catholics held the collective tradition in equal authority to the Scriptures.<sup>16</sup>

The second element of the Roman Catholic reading of the *Consensus Patrum* is their emphasis on Augustine. Western theologians from at least the medieval period onward emphasized Augustine and Augustinian theological themes. Peter Lombard is an illustrative example. As Bougerol

10. Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitory*, 2.6. PL 50.0640.

11. Quantin, "The Fathers in Seventeenth Century," 960.

12. *Ibid.*, 960–67.

13. According to Geoffrey Bromiley this often amounted to "patristic prooftexting" e.g., in Peter Lombard. See Bromiley, "Promise of Patristic Studies," 129.

14. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, II.21.3.

15. *Ibid.*, II.21.3.

16. This was not simply a polemical attack by Turretin. Thomas Aquinas held to this view and placed the writings of The Fathers on the side of the Bible in terms of authority. See Elders, "Thomas Aquinas," 339–40 citing Aquinas, *Quodlib.* XII, art. 26 (q.17, art. Un.): *Dicendum quoad ab eodem Spiritu Scripturae sunt expositae et editae* ("the writing [of The Fathers] and the Scripture were written and explained by the same Spirit").

puts it, for Lombard, “Augustine by far outclasses any other ‘authorities.’”<sup>17</sup> This was no less the case for Thomas Aquinas.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, according to Elders’ helpful chart, Aquinas cited Augustine far more than any other theological figure.<sup>19</sup> Thus, for medieval Catholic theologians, Augustine and Augustinian theology dominated.

Eventually, this emphasis on Augustine developed into an emphasis on Augustine filtered through Thomas Aquinas. By the turn of the twentieth century, Roman Catholic theology was steeped in Thomistic thought. In his book on twentieth-century Catholic theologians, Fergus Kerr humorously paints a picture of the context leading up to the theologians in the Nouvelle Théologie school of Catholicism and the Second Vatican Council: a boring recitation of neothomist theology.<sup>20</sup> However, when the Nouvelle Théologie theologians entered the scene, they began to protest this bland form of neoscholastic Thomist theology. Yves Congar<sup>21</sup> and Henri de Lubac<sup>22</sup> jump-started this movement and it was carried on by figures such as Hans Urs von Balthasar.<sup>23</sup>

These Catholic theologians attempted, by means of a departure from bland neoscholasticism/neothomism and return to the broader *consensus*, to read Aquinas as a part of the whole tradition rather than a-contextually

17. Bougerol, “The Church Fathers,” 115.

18. Elders, “Thomas Aquinas,” 338. Aquinas no doubt read and appropriated the Greek Fathers as well, particularly Pseudo-Dionysius. See 344–47. Here he perhaps paved the way for the return to the mysticism of Origen by twentieth-century Catholic theologians. See below. However, Aquinas cited Pseudo-Dionysius significantly less than Augustine.

19. Ibid., 346–47.

20. Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, 1–6.

21. According to Kerr, Congar believed neoscholasticism was not a preservation of the ancient tradition, as it claimed to be. Accordingly, Congar held that, “the reform or renewal of the Catholic Church . . . was to be on the basis of a retrieval of the fullness of the Catholic tradition that he believed had been lost as Catholics reacted against Protestantism in the so-called Counter-Reformation, and against the ancient churches of the East when they rejected papal authority as conceived and practiced in the early Middle Ages.” See *ibid.*, 37–38. Accordingly, the movement was inherently ecumenical in nature.

22. According to Webster, de Lubac et al. traced the fall of Catholic theology to Duns Scotus and Ockham. See Webster, “Theologies of Retrieval,” 588. Webster also notes that Radical Orthodoxy has picked up this stream of retrieval.

23. Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, 122–25. Though there were undoubtedly differences between each of these figures. See Flynn and Murray, *Res-sourcement*, 279–88 for an excellent discussion of the differences between de Lubac and Balthasar, that latter of whom these authors say was more in line with neothomism than the former.

and a-historically.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, in their polemics the theologians of the Nouvelle Théologie school worked to portray neoscholasticism as a departure from the classic tradition of The Fathers and present the Nouvelle Théologie movement as truly faithful to The Fathers, and therefore, providing the faithful interpretation of Thomas Aquinas.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, in their reinterpretation of Aquinas, they returned to Origen.<sup>26</sup> Their attempt to read Aquinas and scholastic theology in light of the broader theological tradition was, nevertheless, an emphasis on Aquinas. Therefore, this “new” theology, while ecumenically relevant in many ways,<sup>27</sup> is typically Western in its focus upon Augustine and typically Roman Catholic in its centeredness upon Aquinas.

The third element of the Roman Catholic approach is their emphasis on doctrine as developing. John Henry Newman<sup>28</sup> has played a major role in developing the Roman Catholic tradition’s approach to the *Consensus Patrum* in this regard.<sup>29</sup> Newman contended doctrine continually “deepens” and “develops”<sup>30</sup> throughout the history of the church.<sup>31</sup> He saw the “development of doctrine” as the way in which doctrine is brought into “consistency and form.”<sup>32</sup> Newman held that one could not understand the

24. Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, 32–33. Here Kerr discusses Marie-Dominique Chenu; though, the recovery and re-reading of Aquinas was the main element of the other figures as well.

25. Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, 85–86.

26. Kerr states: “The most surprising development in twentieth-century Catholic theology—for neoscholastic theologians and especially for Thomists—was the retrieval of Origen.” Kerr traces this to Jean Daniélou and Olivier Rousseau. See *ibid.*, 80. Notably, even Karl Rahner’s first text was on Origen (101).

27. The relation of, for example, Karl Rahner to T. F. Torrance will be discussed later in this book.

28. See King, *Newman and the Alexandrian Fathers* for an excellent tracing of Newman’s view of the Greek Fathers.

29. See Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century*; Newman, *Lectures on the Prophetic Office*; Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*; Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar* for Newman’s discussions of the tradition of The Fathers.

30. Newman certainly developed in his view of the tradition of The Fathers. During this early stage, Newman saw the Anglican tradition as “*via media*” and a faithful continuation of the early church. See Daley, “The Church Fathers,” 29. Early on Newman had a more static notion of tradition. Later, after concluding doctrine “develops,” Newman saw the Roman Catholic Church as the faithful continuation of the early church.

31. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 21–22. Though this view was already developed to some extent by the Catholic faculty at Tübingen. See Biemer, *Newman on Tradition*, 1.

32. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 28.

early Fathers without the later Fathers and from here began to understand doctrine as having developed throughout the patristic era and beyond.<sup>33</sup>

Newman seemed to imagine that this view could imply a variety of outcomes with which he did not agree. Therefore, Newman laid out what he saw as the characteristics of faithful development: preservation of the type, shared principles, the same organization, anticipation in the beginning of the subsequent phases, later protection and subservience of the earlier, and the power of assimilation.<sup>34</sup> Without these characteristics the development could in no way be considered faithful. Rather, Newman saw any divergences as heretical development.

Despite seeing the Anglican tradition as a “via media” between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in his earlier theology,<sup>35</sup> Newman’s eventual conclusion<sup>36</sup> was that “modern Catholicism is nothing else but simply the legitimate growth and complement that is the natural and necessary development of the doctrine of the early church.”<sup>37</sup> For him, though contemporary Roman Catholic doctrines could not be found in patristic theology explicitly, they were legitimate developments of the teaching of The Fathers. He included numerous examples of this in his *Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, which was, in many ways, a justification of his conversion to Roman Catholicism.<sup>38</sup> This is why for Newman, “to be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant”<sup>39</sup> and “were Athanasius to come to life he would undoubtedly recognize the Catholic Church as his own communion.”<sup>40</sup> In his mind, Protestant doctrine was not a faithful development of the theology of the early church, as was Roman Catholic teaching.

## THE CONSENSUS PATRUM IN EASTERN ORTHODOXY

Turning now to Eastern Orthodoxy, there are a variety of elements which have influenced the Eastern Orthodox view of the *Consensus Patrum*.

33. King, *Newman and the Alexandrian Fathers*, 51–52.

34. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 124.

35. Though he put Anglicanism closer to Roman Catholicism than Protestantism. See Chadwick, *Tradition and Exploration*, 160–61.

36. Of course, this is summing up Newman’s fascinating biography into far too small a space.

37. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 123.

38. See McCarren, “Development of Doctrine,” 118. Though the view was present in a nascent form in Newman’s earlier works (119).

39. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 6.

40. *Ibid.*, 71.

Central, however, are the two key elements that (1) the *consensus* is inherently synthetic and (2) ultimately, the Byzantine tradition is central, particularly as read through the neopalamite tradition of Lossky.

Georges Florovsky, the Orthodox theologian who propagated a call for an Eastern Orthodox “return to The Fathers,” has had much to say concerning the *consensus*.<sup>41</sup> Primarily, he contended that the “Vincentian canon” was inadequate. This means that Vincent of Lérins’ call to hold what has been believed “everywhere, always, and by all” cannot be understood numerically nor empirically. As Florovsky puts it:

Decisive value resides in inner catholicity, not in empirical universality. The opinions of The Fathers are accepted, not as formal subjection to outward authority, but because of the inner evidence of their catholic truth. The whole body of the Church has the right of verifying, or, to be more exact, the right, and not only the right but the duty of certifying.<sup>42</sup>

This means that the *consensus* for Florovsky is not a numerical mean nor even empirically verifiable at all. Rather, the authentic *consensus* is that which reflects the mind of the church, the “ἐκκλησιαστικὸν φρόνημα.”<sup>43</sup> Florovsky saw this as the way in which The Fathers themselves understood tradition. In his words, “the appeal to Tradition was actually an appeal to the mind of the Church.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, in the thought of The Fathers, Florovsky argues, tradition is primarily a hermeneutical principle and method.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, for Florovsky, the *consensus* is synthetic in nature.<sup>46</sup> Herein, he called for theologians to follow the “neopatristic synthesis.” Florovsky contends that “following the Holy Fathers” could not refer to some sort of abstract Tradition. Rather, it must be an appeal to Holy Witnesses and examples.<sup>47</sup> Thus, he viewed Athanasius, for example, within the synthesis of the other Fathers. As such, Gregory Palamas is within the line of patristic tradition via connections with the Cappadocians and Maximus the Confessor.<sup>48</sup>

41. See further Sauve, “Georges V. Florovsky.”

42. Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition*, 51–54.

43. *Ibid.*, 103.

44. *Ibid.*, 83.

45. *Ibid.*, 79.

46. *Ibid.*, 106. Florovsky calls it a “living tradition” because, ultimately, he argues, Tradition is “the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church.”

47. *Ibid.*, 106.

48. See *ibid.*, 113–20.

Florovsky held that the goal of theology is the acquirement of the mind of The Fathers.<sup>49</sup> Florovsky's neopatristic synthesis is a combination of the entire tradition of The Fathers and indeed an appeal to their "mind." Florovsky believed it would be wrong to refer to any sort of static or abstract *consensus*. He saw this in the Roman Catholics who end the *consensus* with the Scholastics, the Protestants who end it with the fifth century, and even the Orthodox who end it with the Seventh Ecumenical Council.<sup>50</sup> Contrary to these three views, Florovsky argued that the Holy Spirit is still working and therefore the *consensus* continues into contemporary times.<sup>51</sup> Herein, he critiqued modern theologians for leaving out the Byzantine period of theological development.<sup>52</sup>

John Meyendorff, the famed patristics scholar and Orthodox theologian, carried this forward. Meyendorff contended that because the same Spirit inspired the Scriptures who inspired the saints, they are to be read together.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the Gospel must always be interpreted within the framework of the "apostolic tradition" or "the wider, living, and uninterrupted continuity of the apostolic church."<sup>54</sup>

A statement concerning his method, though lengthy, deserves to be quoted in full:

In any systematic presentation of Byzantine theology, there is . . . a danger of forcing it into the mold of rational categories foreign to its very nature. This is precisely what occurred in many textbooks of dogmatic theology which appeared in the Orthodox East after the eighteenth century, which claimed to remain faithful to the theology of the Byzantine Fathers. They have been ably characterized by Georges Florovsky as expressions of a "Western captivity" of the Orthodox mind. For, it is not enough to quote an abundance of proof-texts from patristic or Byzantine authors: true consistency requires a unity of method and congeniality of approach.<sup>55</sup>

49. Ibid., 107–9. Florovsky argues that the key is to not quote The Fathers but rather to acquire their mind and follow them because the tradition of The Fathers is inherently *kerygmatic* and centered on piety.

50. Ibid., 110.

51. Ibid., 111.

52. Ibid., 112.

53. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 22.

54. Ibid., 8.

55. Ibid., 128.

Thus, Meyendorff, and Florovsky with him, wanted to reform the way in which Byzantine theology was studied in general and patristic studies in particular. Instead of reading it through a Western, often scholastic lens, they propose reading The Fathers on their own terms.

Ultimately, however, the Orthodox read the *consensus* through the lens of “neopalamism.”<sup>56</sup> Simply put, in an attempt to preserve God’s ultimate transcendence, this view contends that God limits interaction with the world to God’s uncreated (and impersonal) energies.<sup>57</sup> This view is perhaps rooted, at least in part, in Lossky’s unique notion of the development of doctrine.<sup>58</sup>

There are definite differences between Florovsky, Meyendorff, and the neopalamites, but they and others attempting retrievals of the earlier Fathers assumed elements of neopalamism and read the earlier Fathers through a neopalamite reading of Gregory Palamas and the later Byzantine Fathers. Essentially, the neopalamite reading views the early Fathers through this certain reading of Gregory Palamas. Florovsky, for example, saw significant similarities between Athanasius and Gregory Palamas.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, Meyendorff held that Athanasius believed in a sharp distinction between essence and energy in God. In Meyendorff’s words:

The notion of creation, as expressed by Athanasius, leads to a distinction in God between his transcendent essence and his properties such as “power” or “goodness,” which expresses his existence and action *ad extra*, not his essence.<sup>60</sup>

Meyendorff explicated the opinion that what would later be called “Palamism” was in fact precisely the theology Athanasius espoused concerning the distinction between *γεννάω* (*begetting*) and *γενάω* (*creating*).<sup>61</sup> Meyen-

56. Or, in the words of Zizioulas, “neopalamite spectacles” See Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 139. In this instance, Zizioulas criticizes those who attack Gregory Palamas and read him through Lossky. Nevertheless, embedded within this was no doubt a critique of Lossky and the neopalamites themselves. This is not to accuse Florovsky and Meyendorff of neopalamism. Rather, it is simply a statement that elements of the neopalamite assumptions existed in their theology, namely, reading the early Fathers through a certain reading of the later Fathers (especially Palamas).

57. See Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 213 for a classic neopalamite rendering of this idea.

58. See Sauve, “Georges V. Florovsky,” 102–8.

59. See Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 130–32 and Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 43–78. This chapter in Florovsky’s book is an otherwise excellent chapter; however, he attempts to portray Athanasius as basically a Palamite.

60. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 130.

61. *Ibid.*, 131–32.

dorff saw this distinction as being especially important in the context of deification.<sup>62</sup> Thus, Palamas' formulation of what Meyendorff held to be an Athanasian distinction of the three elements of God: essence, energy, and the three hypostases,<sup>63</sup> and, herein, the allocation of God's interaction with the world to his energies (and, by implication, the preservation of God's essence and hypostases from interaction with the world).

## THE *CONSENSUS PATRUM* IN EARLY PROTESTANTISM

Turning now to Protestantism, Protestant theologians and churchmen have studied The Fathers from the very beginning of the movement. The Reformation took place during the Renaissance surge of *ad fontes* or "return to the sources." Following this, the Reformers returned not only to the Bible in its original languages but also to its patristic interpreters and commentators.<sup>64</sup> Emerging from the Western tradition, Protestants such as Calvin and Luther unsurprisingly focused on Augustine and Augustinian theology, seeing him as the theologian *par excellence* of the *Consensus Patrum* and, accordingly, had a western lens through which they viewed The Fathers. Protestants also held to an concept of an ecclesiastical golden age" and conceived of themselves as inheriting the tradition of the early Fathers. Three key elements drove the early Protestant approach to The Fathers: (1) They are not authoritative, (2) Protestantism is in line with The Fathers (rather than Catholicism), (3) an ecclesiastical "golden-age" existed after which time the church began her decline, (4) Augustine is central.

62. Ibid., 186.

63. Ibid., citing PG, 151.1173B. See also Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 187 for further elaboration on the Palamite viewpoint of a threefold distinction between energy, hypostases, and essence.

64. The Reformers, however, did not have the full palate of patristic sources available to them. Indeed, there were only particular texts and particular editions of The Fathers in circulation during the time of the Reformation. Widely available to the Reformers were the following Latin compilations and editions: *Harmony of Discordant Canons* (later called *The Decree of Gratian*) which focused upon the first four councils, *The Glossa Ordinaria* which offered commentary on the Gospels, Gregory the Great's *Epistle 25* which emphasized the first four councils as canonical, and Vincent of Lérins' *Commonitorium* (see Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition*, 75–78). Williams also notes that these collections were generally based on Latin compilations. Additionally, there were editions of Irenaeus (see Backus, *Historical Method*, 134–37) and Tertullian (see Backus, *Historical Method*, 158ff) and the Reformers heavily relied upon Latin editions of the Greek Fathers such as Athanasius and Basil for defense of the doctrine of the Trinity (see Backus, *Historical Method*, 174). Also, there were a variety of guides on how to read The Fathers in circulation (see Backus, *Historical Method*, 196–252).

The Reformer Martin Luther in many ways paved the way for the mindset Protestants later would bring to patristic interpretation. For Luther, The Fathers were to be read solely as theological conversation partners. At times Luther listened to The Fathers because he generally considered them to be good scholars.<sup>65</sup> Yet, they held no more authority than Luther's own contemporaries and were simply, in the helpful words of Schulze, "theological controversialists."<sup>66</sup> For example, Luther saw the doctrine of justification by faith as core and critiqued The Fathers for not being as explicit about this as he would have liked.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, for Luther The Fathers could be corrected and parts of their theology could be entirely erroneous. Herein, as Schulze puts it, "[Luther] rendered an inestimable scholarly service to the church, to theology, and to historiography: He freed The Fathers from tradition. At long last it was possible for them to be mistaken."<sup>68</sup> For Luther no Father was considered better or more authoritative than any other. Indeed, every Father could be mistaken and must be read simply as fellow theological scholars; each could be wrong and probably was at certain points. Only the Scriptures were to be held as authoritative. As such, Luther set the stage for later Protestant approaches to The Fathers, both evangelical and liberal.

For the Reformer John Calvin The Fathers should be viewed as slightly more authoritative than Luther, though still able to be erroneous. Indeed, for this Reformer The Fathers ought to be read as more than simply fellow scholars or readers of Scripture. Key for Calvin was portraying the Protestant Reformation as returning to the ancient Christianity of The Fathers. Still, according to Anthony Lane, for Calvin Scripture is primarily authoritative and The Fathers were considered to be lesser authorities.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, only Scripture is normative and the theological teaching of The Fathers must always be judged in the light of Scripture.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, when doing theology Calvin was always prepared, if necessary, to stand alone against the *consensus* of The Fathers but he never stood against Scripture.<sup>71</sup> Scripture was the only normative text for Calvin. Where The Fathers disagreed with Scripture it was the latter who trumped the former. Yet, he did view at least some of The Fathers as authoritative interpreters of Scripture.<sup>72</sup>

65. Schulze, "Martin Luther and the Church Fathers," 613.

66. *Ibid.*, 615.

67. *Ibid.*, 609–13. Perhaps paving the way for the liberal critique of The Fathers.

68. *Ibid.*, 625.

69. Lane, *John Calvin*, 29.

70. *Ibid.*, 35.

71. *Ibid.*, 36.

72. *Ibid.*, 29.

Central for Calvin was that the Reformation, rather than Catholicism, was in line with the tradition of The Fathers.<sup>73</sup> Calvin used The Fathers polemically to support his Reformed tradition, but he also, as Lane states, “genuinely believed them to support his cause.”<sup>74</sup> Calvin saw The Fathers as ancient witnesses to the truth of Reformed theology and examples of theologians sharing the same convictions as he and his fellow Reformers. Herein, “Calvin’s use of The Fathers was a masterly attempt to relate Protestantism to historic Christianity and show how the Roman error had arisen.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, for Calvin, The Fathers were examples of early explicators of specific Reformed doctrines.

The polemical edge of Calvin’s use of The Fathers is more fully seen in his prefatory address to King Francis in his *Institutes*. Here, Calvin depicts where he sees himself and his fellow Reformers standing, namely, in line with tradition and antiquity; it is the Roman Catholics who had departed.<sup>76</sup> In his words, “it is a calumny to represent us as opposed to The Fathers.”<sup>77</sup> Calvin believes that “there is much that is admirable and wise in those Fathers.”<sup>78</sup> Yet, Calvin makes clear in the *Prefatory Address* that he considers the teaching of The Fathers helpful in places and extremely unhelpful in places. For him, it is essential to use their teachings only inasmuch as they are in agreement with Scripture.

Furthermore, for the Calvin and the Protestant Reformers the church had a “golden age.”<sup>79</sup> Calvin greatly respected the first four ecumenical coun-

73. According to Lane, Calvin’s use of The Fathers was primarily polemical. See Lane, *John Calvin*, 3 for the second thesis of Calvin’s use of The Fathers. See also Oort, “John Calvin,” 697–99.

74. Lane, *John Calvin*, 27–28.

75. *Ibid.*, 54. However, as Lane helpfully points out, Calvin held a more static conception of doctrine whereas modern theological and patristic scholarship has shown that there are deeply rooted differences between the Reformers and The Fathers.

76. *Ibid.*, 33.

77. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, prefatory address.

78. *Ibid.*

79. For Calvin and the Reformed, there were certain Fathers that were more right and therefore to be used more authoritatively. Calvin’s view of The Fathers consists of some figures who were “in” and some who were “out.” He certainly had a few favorites such as John Chrysostom and Cyril of Alexandria who he saw as the best explicators of biblical theology and commentators on the Bible. See Backus, *Historical Method*, 101ff; Oort, “John Calvin,” 693. Indeed, Calvin cited Chrysostom often in regards to Biblical exegesis. In addition, Calvin had great respect for the Cappadocian Fathers, especially Gregory Nazianzen of whose Triadology he was particularly fond. See Calvin, *Institutes*, I.13.17 citing Gregory Nazianzen *Sermon on Sacred Baptism*. Calvin also deeply respected Hilary of Poitiers (see Oort, “John Calvin,” 688) and cited Irenaeus of Lyons often (see Oort, “John Calvin,” 685–86).

cils<sup>80</sup> and he contended that there was a purer age of the church, namely the early centuries of Christianity.<sup>81</sup> For Calvin there was no specific date when the church “fell” from this purer age. Rather, Calvin understood there to have been a more gradual decline.<sup>82</sup> Here began a “pattern of decay” in the Protestant genealogy of church history.<sup>83</sup>

For Calvin and the Reformed, Augustine was central. Though definitely breaking with many elements of the Western Christianity of his time, Calvin continued in the tradition of viewing Augustine, at least implicitly, as the theologian *par excellence*. As Oort puts it, “without doubt [Augustine] was not only the most cited, but also the most appreciated church father for Calvin.”<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, Backus argues that there were ways, such as ecclesiology, wherein Augustine influenced the Reformed and Calvinists in an unacknowledged, but definitely present, fashion.<sup>85</sup> This emphasis on Augustine and Augustinian theological themes carried into later Protestant theology as well.<sup>86</sup>

However, Calvin and the other Reformers did not rely solely upon Augustine. Indeed, they turned to a plethora of sources from both the Greek East and Latin West.<sup>87</sup> As van Oort notes, Calvin was particularly reliant upon Hilary of Poitiers for his doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, Calvin was very fond of the Greek Fathers such as the Cappadocian Fathers and Cyril of Alexandria.<sup>89</sup>

## THE CONSENSUS PATRUM IN LATER PROTESTANTISM

After the time of the Reformation there were a variety of approaches to the *consensus* in the west; the common denominator, however, was a use of Augustine and Augustinian theological themes. Later theologians standing

80. Lane, *John Calvin*, 39–40.

81. *Ibid.*, 40–41.

82. *Ibid.*, 46.

83. A term taken from Georges Florovsky. See Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition*, 110. Florovsky critiques Protestants as a whole for holding to this genealogy of church history. While this critique is no doubt valid as a general statement and can be seen in figures like Calvin, it is also a bit of a generalization.

84. Oort, “John Calvin,” 689.

85. Backus, *Historical Method*, 52.

86. Bromiley, “Promise of Patristic Studies,” 128.

87. See Backus, *Historical Method*, 61.

88. Oort, “John Calvin,” 688.

89. See *ibid.*, 685–99 for a comprehensive overview of Calvin’s reading of many Greek Fathers.

within the Protestant tradition continued within this mindset and continued to read and study The Fathers from this perspective. However, they differed in many ways from their Roman Catholic predecessors. Some theologians vehemently disagreed with any type of numerical notion of the *Consensus Patrum* considering it to be Roman Catholic. Yet, they typically had a place for the theology of The Fathers<sup>90</sup> and regarded The Fathers as reliable and authoritative theological sources and interpreters of Scripture.<sup>91</sup>

Once Protestantism had become more established in the west, their reading of The Fathers became more set and organized. Reformed theologians of later Calvinist theology attempted to provide a *via media* between the error of the Roman Catholic notion of the *consensus* and the Anti-Trinitarians who denied the patristic formulations of Trinity and Christology.<sup>92</sup> Turretin, for example, points out that the Papists of his time held that “The Fathers are to be considered judges capable of deciding controversies of faith by their infallible authority” but the Reformed contend that “The Fathers are to be considered witnesses giving testimony of the consent of the ancient church and the opinion of the church in their own age.”<sup>93</sup> These Catholics argued that the collective teaching of The Fathers was to be considered authoritative and infallible. Turretin and the others wanted to preserve the Reformed doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* against the Catholics who conceived of The Fathers as infallible. In response, Turretin argued that, contrary to the Catholic viewpoint, it is actually impossible to reach a numerical *consensus*.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, The Fathers (individually and collectively) were not prophets or apostles who had the gift of infallibility.<sup>95</sup> They are no more than witnesses to the truth of Scripture. Turretin argued that The Fathers should only be viewed as witnesses to the truth. In viewing The Fathers as such Turretin stood in a long line of Protestant tradition in reading The Fathers.<sup>96</sup>

Yet for these later Protestants, The Fathers were more than simply fellow theologians as they were for Luther, and more than early proponents of Reformed theology as they were for the Reformed; they were *testes veritatis*

90. For example, Polanus, Webb, and Turretin. See Meijering, “The Fathers in Calvinist Orthodoxy,” 867–68.

91. For example, the seventeenth-century Anglicans. See Quantin, “The Fathers in Seventeenth Century Anglican Theology,” 990.

92. Meijering, “The Fathers in Calvinist Orthodoxy,” 867–68. The examples of Polanus, Wolleb, and Turretin are provided.

93. See Turretin, *Institutes of Elentic Theology*, II.21.6.

94. Ibid., II. 21.16.

95. Ibid., II.21.10.

96. Meijering, “The Fathers in Calvinist Orthodoxy,” 868.

(witnesses to the truth”).<sup>97</sup> For Turretin, Christians are to follow and listen to The Fathers, yet not place them on the same level as the Scriptures. Turretin held that The Fathers closest to the apostles are the purest.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, many of the Reformed saw themselves as following these Fathers’ methods in many ways, for example in using non-Biblical terminology in order to clarify Biblical concepts.<sup>99</sup> Turretin believed that The Fathers must not be given too much praise but also they must not be robbed of their due praise.<sup>100</sup>

Much like Calvin, the later Reformed often saw The Fathers as early spokesmen of Protestant doctrines.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, many later Reformed saw them as strong advocates of Reformed theology and the emphasis on grace. Thus, by the time of the solidification of Reformed and evangelical theology in the west, The Fathers were viewed as witnesses to the fact that the Protestant Reformation was a return to the ancient Christian tradition.

Philip Schaff carried this viewpoint forward and developed it substantially.<sup>102</sup> In his genealogy of church history, Schaff roots the Protestant churches solidly in the Western medieval tradition.<sup>103</sup> In his genealogy of church history, Schaff distinguishes between Catholicism and Romanism. An extensive, but extremely illustrative quote, portrays Schaff’s view:

We must distinguish between Catholicism and Romanism. The former embraces the ancient Oriental church, the mediaeval church, and we may say, in a wider sense, all the modern evangelical churches. Romanism is the Latin church turned against the Reformation, consolidated by the Council of Trent and completed by the Vatican Council of 1870 with its dogma of papal absolutism and papal infallibility. Medieval Catholicism

97. Ibid., 868.

98. Turretin, *Institutes of Elentic Theology*, II.21.12. Turretin states: “Although some extend their age down to the tenth century, we do not think it ought to be carried down further than the sixth. For it is certain that purity of doctrine and worship became greatly corrupted after the sixth-hundredth year (in which the antichrist raised his head)—error and superstitions increasing by the just judgment of God.” Thus, the Protestant “golden age” concept was carried on by Turretin. See Turretin, *Institutes of Elentic Theology*, II.21.3.

99. Meijering, “The Fathers in Calvinist Orthodoxy,” 872. Though it is too much to say with Meijering that the Protestant Scholastic approach was closer to The Fathers than the earlier Reformed. See 884–85.

100. Turretin, *Institutes of Elentic Theology*, II.21.17.

101. Meijering, “The Fathers in Calvinist Orthodoxy,” 865.

102. Bromiley, “Promise of Patristic Studies,” 128.

103. Schaff, *History of the Church*, 1–4. Additionally, Schaff compared the importance of the Reformation to the importance of the first century and the split between East and West on the *filioque*.

is evangelical, looking to the Reformation; modern Romanism is anti-evangelical, condemning the Reformation, yet holding with unyielding tenacity the ecumenical doctrines once sanctioned, and doing this all the more by virtue of its claim to infallibility.<sup>104</sup>

Thus, in his view of the historical development of the church, Schaff drew a sharp distinction between “Catholicism” and “Romanism.” He saw the Reformed and evangelical churches as catholic and the churches under Rome as “Romanists.” Furthermore, Schaff saw Romanism as medieval Catholicism taken to its extreme form.<sup>105</sup>

Schaff hoped for an age of ecumenical rapprochement called “evangelical catholicism,” which he saw as in line with the ancient church.<sup>106</sup> Herein, Schaff strongly rejected Protestant “sectarianism” which he believed was the perennial temptation and struggle of Protestantism.<sup>107</sup> Schaff unpacks this viewpoint in his text, *The Principle of Protestantism*.<sup>108</sup> In order to reach this age of ecumenical rapprochement, Schaff proposed a charitable study of church history.<sup>109</sup>

In the eyes of the Reformers and later Protestants, the Protestant Reformation was, therefore, a return to the witness of the classical Church Fathers. For the first generation Reformers like Calvin and also the later Protestants like Turretin, there existed some sort of ecclesiastical “golden age” following which the church fell away into varying levels of heresy and the cry of the day for the Reformers was not only to return to Scripture but to faithfulness to this ecclesiastical “golden age.”<sup>110</sup> Granted, the Reformers were limited in The Fathers which they had available owing to available

104. Ibid., 4. The language has been slightly updated.

105. Ibid., 5.

106. Shriver, *Philip Schaff*, 112.

107. Ibid., 22.

108. Ibid., 22–23. Notably, Charles Hodge reviewed this work positively (ibid., 23).

109. Ibid., 96.

110. Kenneth Stewart states: “The current resurgence of interest in early Christianity is *not* a swing of the pendulum towards something neglected for the five centuries of Protestantism’s existence. It is in fact a return to emphases *regularly* present in historic Protestantism.” See Stewart, “Evangelicalism and Patristic Christianity,” 309. In his article Stewart traces Protestant evangelical use of The Fathers from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. See p. 309–19. Though Stewart convincingly argues for the essential connection between patristic theology and the Reformers and points to examples of evangelical usage of The Fathers since the Reformation he fails to successfully portray returning to The Fathers as indeed a part of what it meant to be evangelical following the Reformation. Indeed, a Biblicist approach developed that was essentially the opposite. See below.

editions and were more informed by Western Fathers such as Augustine; however, they indeed returned to the classical Greek Fathers as well, seeing the patristic tradition as evidence that the Protestant community was a continuation of the ancient church. However, this approach would soon change.

### THE LIBERAL AND BIBLICIST APPROACHES OF NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY PROTESTANTISM

Though the Reformers returned to The Fathers they failed to outline any sort of objective guideline for appropriation of The Fathers and Protestant evangelicals have subsequently avoided The Fathers due, further, to both medieval Catholicism and modern liberalism.<sup>111</sup> Accordingly, in the words of Geoffrey Bromiley, “patristics is one of the most neglected areas in evangelical theology.”<sup>112</sup> Despite the fact that the Protestant Reformation was nothing less than an attempt at a return to The Fathers and the patristic “golden age” as the Reformers saw it, following the first generation Reformers and their immediate followers, the Protestant appropriation of the Greek Fathers turned into one of two approaches. Protestants either viewed the Greek Fathers via the liberal Protestant lens of separating the “kernel” from the “chaff” or via the fundamentalist and Biblicist interpretation of the Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura*, essentially ignoring the theological tradition from which they arose.<sup>113</sup> These opposing approaches paved the way for evangelicals to “discover” the Greek Fathers during and following Torrance’s time (the subject of the following chapter of this book).

In many ways, Rudolf Bultmann encapsulates the liberal Protestant theological methodology towards both the Bible and The Fathers. Herein he provides an example of the methodology of the liberal Protestant approach to written theological sources. Bultmann did not look at The Fathers

111. Though, as Bromiley helpfully puts it “one should not overdraw the picture.” He notes Philip Schaff’s patristic scholarship as well as the more general appreciation of Augustine in Reformed theology, both of which this chapter has discussed. See Bromiley, “Promise of Patristic Studies,” 128.

112. *Ibid.*, 125.

113. Though as Stewart aptly puts it: “Extremely liberal segments of Protestant Christianity in the twentieth century—those which allowed to be called into question the virginal conception of Jesus, his physical resurrection three days after death and his personal return at the end of this age—cannot be thought to have taken very seriously the early ecumenical councils or the theological consensus of early Christianity.” See Stewart, “Evangelicalism and Patristic Christianity,” 308.

as directly as theologians such as Adolf von Harnack did, yet he did have, more broadly, a reading of the theological tradition. For Bultmann, the key to theological interpretation is “de-mythologizing.”

De-mythologizing is the process of looking for the existential message of the Gospel within the worldview in which it was embedded. According to David Fergusson, “it seeks to bring out the real intention of myth. . .”<sup>114</sup> Fergusson lucidly examines how this worked itself out in Bultmann by a comparison of Barth to Bultmann. According to Fergusson, for Barth the life, death and resurrection of Christ is intrinsically significant; for Bultmann it is only significant as it was existentially encountered in the present.<sup>115</sup>

Adolf von Harnack,<sup>116</sup> the famed historian of dogma is perhaps the clearest example of the liberal Protestant approach to the Greek Fathers in particular.<sup>117</sup> Harnack was faithful to the general liberal methodology as exemplified in Bultmann and, following this methodology, he had a certain approach to The Fathers, especially the Greek Fathers. Harnack saw certain Fathers as more “in” than others. Furthermore, for him, a core to theological history exists containing key theological assertions. Harnack saw the job of the theologian and historian of dogma to be to extract this “kernel” from the “chaff.”

For Harnack, doctrine developed both positively and negatively. Arianism and Papism, for example, were negative developments. They emerged and were erroneous and need to be removed by the theologian. For him, much of doctrine and historical Christianity is the “Hellenization of the Gospel” and the application of Greek thought to Biblical concepts.<sup>118</sup> The key in dogmatics is thus to always search deeply for “Jesus Christ and his Gospel”<sup>119</sup> and to distinguish the “kernel and husk.”<sup>120</sup> Indeed, while the language and even thought of the Gospel was done in the cultural framework of its time, the kernel could be preserved owing to its permanent validity.<sup>121</sup>

114. Fergusson, *Bultmann*, 108.

115. Ibid., 118–19. This is why Bultmann agreed with Barth’s dialectical project in *Romans*. However, for Bultmann the dialectic was only significant as it was experienced in the life of the believer (ibid., 22).

116. See Harnack, *History of Dogma* for his magisterial work.

117. Though, as Bromiley notes, liberalism has unquestionably “produced some of the finest patristic work of the modern period.” Yet, liberal presuppositions are “readily enough perceived.” See Bromiley, “Promise of Patristic Studies,” 128.

118. See Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, 207–9, for example.

119. Ibid., 10.

120. Ibid., 12.

121. Ibid., 12–14.

Thus, theology is searching for the “Gospel in the Gospel” and looking for the core “Christian idea.”<sup>122</sup>

Perhaps ironically, Harnack had a particular fondness for Athanasius of Alexandria.<sup>123</sup> For Harnack, Athanasius was in many ways a theologian from which his own German liberal tradition emerged. He contended that Athanasius saved the church and preserved the core of the Gospel: “fellowship of God with man” for in Harnack’s words, “the entire Faith, everything in defense of which Athanasius staked his life, is described in one sentence: *God himself has entered into humanity*.”<sup>124</sup> This core teaching was, to use Bultmann’s language, the “existential truth” embedded in the Christian myth and other external and mythological developments were simply the “Hellenization” of the Gospel.

A number of other theologians approached The Fathers via this lens. R. P. C. Hanson, the famed patristics scholar wrote a number of texts in this vein.<sup>125</sup> Hanson held to the “development of doctrine.” He saw orthodoxy as a process of trial and error. Indeed for him orthodoxy was “found” not “maintained.”<sup>126</sup> He states, “the story is the story of how orthodoxy was reached, found, not of how it was maintained.”<sup>127</sup> Charles Kannengiesser is also in the liberal tradition of reading the patristic tradition. He believed that Athanasius was an example of a theologian who should be followed in style and method today but not necessarily in substance. For Kannengiesser the principles and beliefs of the early church must not be followed today—thus theologians cannot use The Fathers like Newman did—rather knowledge of the early church can help the church today in moving forward away from the backward views held during the patristic era. Maurice Wiles viewed orthodoxy in much the same way as Hanson, seeing saw as a development and something which was “made.”<sup>128</sup> For example, Wiles’ text

122. Ibid., 14–15.

123. Harnack, as John Behr helpfully puts it, “admired Athanasius, for while he might have ‘erased every trait of the historical Jesus of Nazareth’ (whatever that meant to Harnack), Athanasius nevertheless ‘saved the character of Christianity as a religion of the living fellowship with God.’” Behr, *The Nicene Faith: Part I*, 165 citing Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 4:45. See also 4:26 where Harnack elaborates upon his view that Athanasius’ theology was rooted in soteriology, a soteriology of union between God and man.

124. Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 26, italics original.

125. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*.

126. Ibid., 848.

127. Ibid., 870.

128. See Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine*.

*Archetypal Heresy: Arianism through the Centuries*<sup>129</sup> argues that Arianism as traditionally presented was in fact a polemical invention of Athanasius.

For the liberal tradition the church fathers in general and the Greek Fathers in particular were subject to the critique of Hellenization and mythologizing. However, there were figures (such as Athanasius for Harnack) who preserved the kernel of the “Christian idea” in their theology and who, after a process of de-mythologizing and removing the chaff, could be retrieved. Ultimately, figures like Harnack from the liberal tradition indeed have provided much to be appreciated from a historical perspective but also have caused serious theological problems inasmuch as they simply read their own liberal and existentialist “de-Hellenizing” tradition back into The Fathers.<sup>130</sup>

On the opposite end of the spectrum, and most likely a Protestant Reformation “throwing of the baby out with the bath water” in response to either medieval Roman Catholicism<sup>131</sup> or nineteenth and twentieth-century liberal Protestantism, was the Biblicist and fundamentalist avoidance of any aspect of tradition. Holmes paints this mindset as holding the commitment that:

God has given us his truth in the Bible, our job is to live it and proclaim it, what other people may or may not have thought about it in the past is of no interest to us, that they were generally wrong is evident from the poor state of the ‘traditional’ churches.<sup>132</sup>

These Protestants (often evangelicals) have bought into Georges Florovsky’s “pattern of decay” reading of the patristic era discussed earlier in this chapter. As Bromiley helpfully puts it:

As they seem to see it, the patristic age brought a rapid declension from apostolic Christianity. From at least the early second century, doctrines and practices developed that swept the church into a movement which culminated in the Middle Ages and which still continues in Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and the Coptic Church. The Reformation represented a return to biblical Christianity but, in the eyes of some, even this was an imperfect return both theologically and practically. Hence the patristic appeal of the Reformers might be construed

129. Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy*.

130. Sara Parvis argues much of patristic scholarship from this time is “ineluctably Hegelian.” See Parvis, *Marcellus of Ancyra*, 3.

131. Perhaps the focus on the numerical *Consensus Patrum*.

132. Holmes, *Listening to the Past*, x.

as a point of weakness rather than of strength . . . Granted this type of interpretation, there is obviously little to be learned from The Fathers.<sup>133</sup>

This viewpoint is the traditional Protestant and Reformed view of an “ecclesiastical golden age” intensified to its extreme in response to medieval Roman Catholicism and Protestant liberalism. So, by the time of the mid-twentieth century, evangelical Protestants were, in large part, ignorant of the tradition of The Fathers. As such, the time was ripe for a “return” to and “discovery” of the patristic tradition amongst evangelical Protestants, which shall be explored in the next chapter of this book.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored how there have been diverse views of the *Consensus Patrum*, not only among Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox but also (and perhaps even more so) among the early Protestants themselves. This chapter argued that the Eastern Orthodox traditionally view the patristic tradition synthetically and through the lens of Gregory Palamas (often as he is interpreted in the neopalamite school). This chapter also argued that the common factor among Western theologians turning to the *consensus* is that Augustine is core and Augustinian themes are central (for the Catholics, Augustine read through Aquinas). However, by the time of the mid-twentieth century, the majority of evangelical Protestants avoided The Fathers. Indeed, it seemed that The Fathers and the *Consensus Patrum* were the inheritance of Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and (in a very critical way) the liberal tradition. Thus, immediately prior to Torrance’s time, his own evangelical and Reformed tradition was dominated by two opposite viewpoints, namely, a liberal denial of the importance of The Fathers or the Biblicist avoidance of The Fathers.

There are numerous parallel elements as well as divergences between Torrance’s notion of the *Consensus Patrum* and the view of the patristic tradition of the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant traditions discussed in this chapter. As will be discussed in the subsequent chapters of this book, Torrance’s notion of the *consensus* is Christologically-centered and rooted in the Nicene doctrine of *ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ* and the epistemological and soteriological implications that surround them, as Torrance sees them. This conception is traditionally Protestant in many ways, for example following the Reformed emphasis on the doctrines of Trinity and

133. Bromiley, “Promise of Patristic Studies,” 127.

Christology (as seen in Calvin) and having select key figures rather than the Orthodox synthetic approach and the Catholic numerical view. Yet Torrance also shares elements in common with the Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox, as shall be seen, particularly Florovsky's call to return to the "mind" of The Fathers and the emphasis on piety. In many ways, the Torrancean *Consensus Patrum* is, in a sense, a Reformed evangelical version of Newman's "development of doctrine." As such, Torrance's vision of the *consensus* is unique in relation to others' notions of the *consensus* including his own Reformed tradition.

Torrance's conception of the *consensus* is not numerical in any way. For him, the *consensus* cannot be measured in an empirical sense at all. Rather, as noted in the introduction of this book, for him the *consensus* means "classical theology" and chapters 3 and 4 of this book will show how it is more of a shared mindset and conviction, centered upon the fulcrum of the *ὁμολόσιον*. However, Torrance's view has certain similarities to the Catholic view of the development of doctrine. Torrance does not explore the notion as such explicitly anywhere. Yet, for him different eras of the history of theology provided different areas of theological development. For example, as shall be seen in chapter 4 of this book, Torrance sees The Fathers as contributing an emphasis on the being of God in his acts, and Reformers, the acts of God in his being, and Karl Barth bringing the two together. Furthermore, Torrance, in many ways, sees Athanasius and Karl Barth as mutually informing one another owing to their shared theological conviction surrounding the being of God and the acts of God. Therefore, though Athanasius may not have used Barthian language, Torrance feels comfortable putting Barthian-type words in his mouth. No doubt, this is not exactly the same as Newman's development of doctrine, but there is substantial overlap.

Torrance's notion of the *consensus* is most similar to the traditional Protestant conception. The first aspect of notability is that his overall vision is basically the same. Torrance does not explicitly define any era of orthodoxy or intentionally identify a "golden era," but Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria are clear favorites. Therefore, in practice Torrance sees a golden era of patristic theology, namely, from Irenaeus to Cyril of Alexandria. Second, Torrance's genealogy of church history has significant similarity to that of Philip Schaff inasmuch as they both view an evangelical stream faithful to the Gospel running through church history. The following chapters of this book will unpack these elements in full.

In conclusion, Torrance's vision of the *Consensus Patrum* shares many traits with other views. Yet, it is also unique. Mainly, Torrance's uniqueness lies in his rooting the *consensus* in the *ὁμολόσιον* and Athanasius, and

more generally, catholic themes and figures. Torrance's vision is a unique synthesis of Reformed and patristic orthodoxy, centered on the person of Christ. Herein, he provides a way forward for ecumenical rapprochement between different Christian denominations also rooted in the theology of The Fathers.

Torrance did not exist in a cultural vacuum. By the time of the mid-twentieth century the two opposing approaches to tradition (liberal and fundamentalist) set the parameters for potential readings of the tradition of The Fathers. This polarized situation typically left evangelicals in complete ignorance of the patristic tradition and set the stage for evangelicals to "discover" The Fathers. On account of this, the twentieth century has witnessed a movement of *ressourcement* among Protestant evangelicals. Nevertheless, the outcome of this discovery of The Fathers has been varying amongst evangelicals. The next chapter of this book will examine the twentieth century return to the patristic tradition by evangelicals, arguing for Torrance's uniqueness and setting the stage for a full study and assessment of Torrance's own version of the *Consensus Patrum*.