

Preamble

The celebration of Luther’s Reformation this year brings up once again the question of *sola Scriptura*, and in particular the problem of the role of tradition.

We tend to think that tradition is the hunting estate of the Roman Catholic Church. However, Benjamin B. Warfield reminded us that outside the Reformed faith, with its coherent doctrine of revelation and inspiration, we fall into the snares of either mysticism or rationalism. We still face both today. The tradition of the Roman Church tends towards mysticism, saints, and the numinously miraculous, while the tradition of Enlightenment humanism is all around us in rationalism in its postmodern forms, self-evident scientific truths, and politically correct liberalism with its dogmas of tolerance and social constructionism.

But as Warfield remarked, not without a touch of humor,

The Mystic blows hot, the Rationalist blows cold. Warm up a Rationalist and you inevitably get a Mystic; chill down a Mystic and you find yourselves with a Rationalist on your hands. The history of thought illustrates repeatedly the easy passage from one to the other.¹

One remarkable example of this passage in the twentieth century is found in the works of the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, who described his pilgrimage from socialism to faith (and later to Catholicism) in his three-volume autobiography, *Chronicles of Wasted Time*. I’ll never forget his description of the bust of Marx—or was it Lenin? anyway, one of the heroes of dialectical materialism—with a mystical aura of light falling on it in a “chapel” in the house of Fabian socialists Sydney and Beatrice Webb in Surrey, the moneyed garden of bourgeois England.

¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Critical Reviews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 366–67.

So human tradition, human reasoning, the wisdom of the world, call it what you like, is both mystical and rationalist, and it swings like a pendulum from one extreme to the other. Mysticism and rationalism feed off each other. The human psyche needs them both.

The best way we could honor brother Martin today would be to criticize our inherent tendencies to both mysticism and rationalism and hold on to the biblical gospel: grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, Scripture alone, and to the glory of God alone. The gospel punctures both rationalism and mysticism with the double-edged sword of the inspired truth of Scripture and the immediate witness of the Spirit, God's reason, and God's mystery.

Peter Lillback had the masterly idea of writing *A New Ninety-Five Theses on Scripture*. Canons to the right of him, canons to the left of him, he maintains *sola Scriptura* against both mysticism and rationalism, and human traditions whether "spiritual" or "critical."

As Reformed believers, we must constantly turn to Scripture as our foundation and hope. This is the way forward: in faithfulness to revealed truth, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The heart of our confession is not, as in Roman Catholicism, Scripture *plus* tradition, or as in theological liberalism, Scripture *plus present rationality*, but Scripture and *the witness of the Spirit*. That makes the Reformed faith what it is, biblical truth come into its own, as B. B. W. would have said!

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