



Saint Cyprian writing in his cell. Miniature (1475-1482) by a master close to Botticelli. Vatican Library.

WORDS WRITTEN AND WORDS INSPIRED: MORE AND *SOLA SCRIPTURA*

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The main features of More's position on Luther's doctrine of evident scripture and Tyndale's deployment of it are familiar to students of More's controversial works: adherence to scripture alone defies the gospel promise of Christ's perpetual presence in the Church; it defies the Church's authority, and it renounces the prophecy in Jeremiah 31:33 of a new covenant to be written not in books but in men's hearts. These assertions appear repeatedly in the *Responsio ad Lutherum*, *A Dialogue concerning Heresies*, and *The Apology*. However, in *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* More appealed to one further dimension of orthodoxy's position with regard to scriptural authority: asserting the authority of the specifically unwritten character of the new covenant, he argued that it displaced the written character of the law. Tyndale, in his adherence to *sola scriptura*, More found, could thus be represented as defying the gospel covenant.

Key words: Tudor controversy, scripture, More's *Responsio ad Lutherum*, *Dialogue concerning Heresies*, *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*.

Les traits majeurs de la position de More sur la thèse luthérienne de la claritas Scripturarum et son adoption par Tyndale sont familiers pour quiconque étudie ses écrits polémiques: adhérer à la seule Écriture, c'est pour More défier la promesse faite par le Christ de demeurer à jamais présent dans son Église; c'est défier aussi l'autorité de l'Église, ainsi que la prophétie (en Jér 31,33) d'une alliance nouvelle écrite non dans les livres mais dans les coeurs. Ces assertions figurent çà et là dans la Responsio ad Lutherum, le Dialogue concerning Heresies, et The Apology, mais c'est dans le livre VI de la Confutation que, pour la première fois, More revendique l'autorité du caractère spécifiquement oral de la Nouvelle Alliance, et affirme que cette oralité a typologiquement remplacé le caractère écrit de la loi. En adhérant au principe de sola scriptura, Tyndale, aux yeux de More, défait l'alliance de l'Évangile.

Mots-clés: *controverser, Écriture, Loi nouvelle non écrite.*

Los rasgos de la posición de Moro sobre la tesis luterana de la *claritas Scripturarum* y su adopción por Tyndale son familiares para cualquiera que estudie sus escritos polémicos: adherir a la sola Escritura es para Moro desafiar la promesa hecha por Cristo de permanecer para siempre presente en su Iglesia; es desafiar también la autoridad de la Iglesia, así como la profecía (en Jer. 31,33) de una alianza nueva escrita no en los libros sino en los corazones. Estas aserciones figuran aquí y allá en su *Responsio ad Lutherum*, *Dialogue concerning Heresies*, y *The Apology*, pero es en el libro VI de la *Confutation* que, por la primera vez, Moro reivindica la autoridad del carácter específicamente oral de la Nueva Alianza, y afirma que esta oralidad ha reemplazado tipológicamente el carácter escrito de la Ley. Adhiriendo al principio de *sola scriptura*, Tyndale, a los ojos de Moro, desafía la alianza del Evangelio.

Palabras claves: controversia, Escritura, Ley nueva no escrita.

More addressed the question of scriptural authority in the first of his controversial works because Luther made it impossible for him to avoid doing so, and the question of assessing its standing among other authoritative instruments continued to occupy his polemic into the period after his resignation of the chancellorship.¹ In the *Responsio ad Lutherum* and in subsequent works More so fervently opposed the criterion of evident scripture that it seems to

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¹ More's numerous discussions of *sola scriptura* and the related questions of the priority of the Church to the word, and of the word to the Church, are recurring features of his polemical works. However, of particular importance for his views on the status of scriptural authority are *Responsio ad Lutherum*, Book I, chapters 8, 9, and 10, and Book II, chapter 8; *Dialogue concerning Heresies*, Book I, chapters 20, 21, and 22, and chapters 23 to 31 passim; *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, Book III and Book VI; and *The Apology of Sir Thomas More, Knight*, chapters 5 through 8. In Book IX of the *Confutation* More singles out as especially notable the last chapter of Book III of that work because of its importance for his opposition to the belief that God would have us believe nothing without writing. My text for all references to More's works is *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1963-1997). Spelling and punctuation have been modernized.

have represented for him an error of fundamental, perhaps unique, importance among what he viewed as the evils of the reformers. He was certain that *sola scriptura* represented an assault on virtually every sphere of the Church's authority, and he thought it imperiled souls, particularly those of the unlearned, by raising doubts about the Church's competence in Biblical interpretation. Adhering to scripture alone was tantamount to denying the witness of sacred writings outside the canonical books as well as things delivered by Christ to the apostles by spoken words and preserved in tradition but never committed to writing. "Stand firm," St. Paul admonished in 2Thessalonians 2: 15, "and hold the traditions that you have learned whether by word or by letter of ours," and from this More inferred that the spoken was at least equal in authority to the written word (CW 5, 99/3-6). Christ did not take care to put things in writing, the Church faithfully affirmed, and Luther's defiance of its learned authorities made his interpretations of the written word arbitrary and erratic.² Christ spoke through the apostles to his Church, unequivocally, in asserting *Qui uos audit me audit*, who hears you hears me (CW 5, 128/5-6).

Nor could More reconcile *sola scriptura* with Jeremiah 31:33. The day is coming, this text indicated, when a new covenant will be written in men's hearts. More's reading of Jeremiah followed traditional authorities on the distinction between the spirit and the letter of the law. The letter kills, the spirit renews. Jeremiah 31:33 foreshadows the inscription of the saving covenant of the spirit in the hearts of the faithful. More believed, in addition, that a distinction was being drawn in Jeremiah between things that are interior and spiritual and things that are written and external. He had unassailable authority for that conviction. Aquinas, for example, sought to determine whether the new law of the Gospel is a written or an inward

² This argument is advanced early in the *Responsio*; More is discussing Luther's dispute with Catharinus and denouncing Luther's arrogance while drawing attention to the inevitability of exegetical error in Luther's mode of interpretation (CW 5, 123/9-125/37). More's position is closely related to one expressed by Erasmus in a letter to Colet; see Laurel Carrington, "The Boundaries between Text and Reader: Erasmus' Approach to Reading Scripture," *Archive for Reformation History* 88 (1997), 5.

law and formed a resolution on the basis of St. Paul's reading, in Hebrews 8: 8-9, of the text in Jeremiah: "this is the covenant that I will set up with the house of Israel," Paul wrote, "I will put my laws in their minds and write them upon their hearts."³ The distinction between the written and the inward law (*scripta, vel indita*) in Aquinas is of unusual importance for students of the debate over *sola scriptura* because it could be seen as reinforcing the position of those who sought to undermine the importance attached by reformers to the written word. Those who held exclusively to scripture were not granting sufficient credence to the distinction between the written and the interior covenant. Aquinas wrote that the new law is the law of the new covenant, and, in words that imply a distinction between written testaments and the covenant of grace prefigured in Jeremiah, he asserted that the power of the new covenant is in the grace of the Spirit given through faith in Christ (*gratia Spiritus sancti, quae datur per fidem Christi*). Confining the working of grace to written texts would demolish the distinction between old and new covenants and between the letter and the spirit. However, while written and unwritten covenants are for this reason to be distinguished, the latter neither replaces nor diminishes the former. Everything written in the New Testament, Aquinas held, is concerned with the grace of the Holy Spirit, either disposing us for its reception or directing us in its exercise (*vel sicut dispositiva, vel sicut ordinativa ad usum hujus gratiae*).

An authority cited by Aquinas that contains elements of More's position is Augustine's *De spiritu et littera*. In Chapter 41 of this work Augustine asserted that the law of works was written on tables of stone while the law of faith was written in the heart. The former promised an earthly reward and pertained to the Old Testament; the

latter a spiritual reward and pertained to the New Testament.⁴ In Book I of the *Dialogue concerning Heresies*, More sought to link the law written in the heart--the spiritual law--with the substance of faith, and these, in turn, with heavenly mysteries revealed by Christ, without writing, to his apostles. The familiar text in Jeremiah is cited in support of the interior nature of the law of Christ's holy gospel, and its connection with the secret operation of the Holy Spirit came as almost an inevitability. The law of the gospel embraces not only the books of the evangelists,

But much more specially the substance of our faith itself / which our Lord said he would write in men's hearts / not only because of the secret operation of God and his Holy Spirit . . . but also for that he first without writing revealed those heavenly mysteries by his blessed mouth / through the ears of his apostles and disciples into their holy hearts. (CW 6, 143/6-14)

The traditional distinction between things literally written and those written in the heart is affirmed in the next few lines as More deploys Jeremiah 31:33 against those who base their faith on the written word. The inspired word, More asserts, is anterior to words written in books. Christ first imparted the faith by secret inspiration to St. Peter; it was then spread abroad through the world, "[so] that his faith was by the mouths of his holy messengers put into men's ears / and by his holy hand written in men's hearts or ever [before] any word thereof almost was written in the book" (CW 6, 143/32-35).

The phenomenon of interiority--the word inspired rather than the word written--also gave More a reason for linking Jeremiah 31:33 with his two most frequently cited New Testament texts, Matthew 28:20 and John 16:13, in which the specifically non-scriptural

³ *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae. 106, 1. (St. Thomas Aquinas assumed Hebrews to be Pauline.) Gogan found in Johannes Pupper an interpretation of Jeremiah 31:33 that accords closely with the position taken by More: "Only when [scripture] is combined with the 'gospel written by God in the heart through the Holy Spirit' does it turn into *spiritus vivificans*, the breath of life. This 'law of the gospel' is the charity poured out by God in our hearts." See Brian Gogan, *The Common Corps of Christendom: Ecclesiological Themes in the Writings of Sir Thomas More* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 58.

⁴ *Sicut ergo lex factorum scripta in tabulis lapideis, mercesque ejus terra illa promissionis, quam carnalis domus Israel cum ex Aegypto liberata esset, accepit, pertinet ad Testamentum Vetus: ita lex fidei scripta in cordibus, mercesque ejus species contemplationis, quam spiritualis domus Israel ab hoc mundo liberata percipiet, pertinet ad Testamentum Novum* (PL 44:225).

workings of Christ and the Holy Spirit seem to be portended.⁵ It was therefore only natural for him to enlist these texts in his fight against *sola scriptura*, asserting, as he did in the *Dialogue*, that the faith was spread by Christ writing in men's hearts before it was put in writing, and, in the *Confutation*, that God was under no constraint to put any sacrament, ceremony, or point of belief in writing,

for any fear lest it should fall away / and that he could not with his own spirit keep it in men's hearts and usage without writing, as well as he kept in the good generations the knowledge of his promises and his laws long and many ages before the law was written. (CW 8, 155/32-36)

Canonicity, furthermore, rests upon the authority of the Church. Because Christ's promise of perpetual presence is the basis of inerrancy, there is no escaping the Church's competency to tell God's word from man's and to decide in matters of controversial interpretation. In this, More followed traditional readings of Augustine's assertion in the *Contra epistolam Manichaei* that he places credence in the Gospels because he is directed by the Church to do so.⁶ Augustine's assertion of the Church's authority in scriptural matters was of considerable importance in More's battle against the reformers, and it was equally important that the Church's authority did not rest merely on consensus; the perpetual presence of the Holy Spirit and its active operation gave More his assurance of the Church's infallible guidance. To submit all things to the test of

⁵ Germain Marc'hadour lists numerous references to Matthew 28:20 and John 16:13 throughout More's controversial works, particularly the *Dialogue* and the *Confutation*. See *The Bible in the Works of Thomas More*, 5 vols. (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1969-1972), Part II 78-80 and 190-2; see also Part IV, 117-18. The frequency of citations indicates that More found these two texts unusually significant. They form an important part of his ecclesiology in general, and, because they assure Christ's presence in and direct communication with his Church, they provided, as well, a basis for challenging *sola scriptura*.

⁶ *Ego vero Evangelio non crederem, nisi me catholicae Ecclesiae commoveret auctoritas* (MPL 42, 176). Quoted in CW 5, 743. More affirms the Church's authority to legislate and to interpret in Book II of *Responsio ad Lutherum*. See CW 5, 600/1-601/13, and Marc'hadour, "Augustine's dictum", *The Bible*, Part IV, 199-206.

canonical writings, as Luther demanded, was to assume a privilege that More was sure would lead to anarchy.

In a statement of unusual comprehensiveness in Book VI of the *Confutation*, More asserted in broad but unequivocal outline what had come to be his position on divine revelation and the status of the scriptures therein, and the illuminating but not surprising implication of his words is that revelation is both written and unwritten, the fact of being written, in and of itself, adding no distinctive significance to truths imparted in the words of the scriptures. God employs two manners of revelation, More observed, "partly by writing, partly without." The first embraces scripture and traditions delivered to the Church by the evangelists and apostles, and the second is the secret inspiration imparted by the Holy Spirit of "every necessary truth that he will have his Church farther know and bounden to believe" (CW 8, 996/15-23). When these assertions are combined with the statement, made in Book I of the *Confutation*, that "the Church is not above the scripture and holy writ," but that it is so taught by the Holy Spirit that it is not possible for it to be deceived in the understanding of the written word, then More's position on the authority of the scriptures seems complete and consistent. In his assertions on the two modes of revelation, the Church informed by the Spirit is the authoritative instrument of scriptural interpretation. More was certain that the Church's God-given infallibility and the truth of scripture were two different matters and had to be kept strictly distinct, and that when the two seem not to be in harmony then truth is found through the inspired authority of the Church. He asserted in Book I of the *Confutation* that those who, holding to *sola scriptura*, invoke scripture to confound the Church's teachings by creating contradiction are guilty of defying God, as it were, in person, for,

all such as so construe the scripture that they would make the scripture seem to be contrary to the faith of Christ's church do damnably construe it contrary to the teachinge of God and his Holy Spirit. (CW 8, 133/36-134/2)

These are mostly familiar features of More's orthodoxy. They have been often noted by students of More's polemical works, and they recur with predictable regularity in the *Responsio ad Lutherum*,

the *Dialogue concerning Heresies*, the *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, and the *Apology*. However, what has not been so unmistakably seen is that More was led in the dispute over *sola scriptura* to examine the modes and avenues by which God makes himself present and known in the world, and this, in turn, led him to contemplate the significance of Christ's act of instituting the Church. The controversy provoked by the reformers' stand on scriptural authority, in other words, led, in a roundabout but wholly logical fashion, first to the question of the Church's authority and then to that of its foundation. More arrived at this conclusion in Book VI of the *Confutation*, in which he happens to have been attempting to form a response to Tyndale's assertion that the true Church was not prior to but succeeded heretical factions of scribes and Pharisees that, in Tyndale's words, "were crept up into the seat of Moses, Aaron, and the holy prophets and patriarchs." In disputing Tyndale's reading of Christ's renunciation of Pharisaical ceremonialism, More discovered an illuminating significance in the distinction between the law written and the law unwritten, and this enabled him to ascribe particular importance to the specifically unwritten status of the new law imparted by Christ. He did so by invoking, once again, the words of Jeremiah 31:33, and by asserting that the prophet meant to draw a distinction between the old law, which Moses received and delivered in writing, and the new law, which Christ neither received nor delivered, in any part, in writing:

Albeit that these words of the prophet be specially spoken for the difference between the old law that was called the law written because Moses received and delivered the law by writing / and the new law whereof Christ neither received nor delivered any part by writing: yet may those words well serve for this purpose also, sith [since] the truth of them is also in this point verified, to which truth saint Paul subscribes where [1 Cor. 12:13] he says that no man can say and confess our Lord Jesus but by the Holy Ghost. (CW 8, 615/25-33)

This is, for More, a new application of Jeremiah 31:33. What he is saying is that Christ's words were spoken rather than written to the

apostles and that the significance of this is heightened by the fact that the Mosaic law was embodied in writing.

More's immediate point is that Tyndale's defiance of the clergy's preaching ministering places him under the malediction of Christ in Luke 10: 16, "he that despiseth you despiseth me" (CW8, 616/22). However, the attention drawn to the distinction between speaking and writing applies, as well, to More's position on *sola scriptura* because by portraying the new covenant under Christ as having been instituted by speaking rather than writing, he could the more convincingly portray Tyndale as attaching undue importance to written texts. Moreover, the fact of being spoken rather than written is adduced in the *Confutation* to exemplify an elemental feature of the new covenant: that is, its status as interior reality. If this is so, if Christ's presence may be seen not only as taking precedence over anything written but, in fact, as annihilating any distinguishing importance inherent in the written character (and in More's day, the printed character) of biblical texts, then Tyndale's position on the authority of scriptural texts could be construed as defying the new covenant of the unwritten law.

More therefore seized the opportunity in Book VI of the *Confutation* to position Tyndale among the Pharisaical pretenders to Mosaic authority, making him seem an adversary of the new covenant. His strategy was to construct a typology in which the written-unwritten distinction was central, and for these reasons, the sixth book of the *Confutation*, to which I shall turn in a moment, contains an important new dimension in More's dispute with those who cited scripture to defy the Church. It also affords an unusual view of More's dexterity, not just in the use of biblical citations, but in sustained interpretation; this is one of only a few occasions on which More is seen practicing a kind of typological exposition, which, in its essential features, resembles the hermeneutic mode that Erasmus described as the ancient manner of mystical interpretation.⁷ Furthermore, the feature of the new covenant to which More draws

⁷ Erasmus was commenting on Luther's method of exposition in a letter to Pope Leo X of September 1520. See *Correspondence of Erasmus* (U of Toronto P, 1988), CWE 8:50.

attention in Book VI of the *Confutation*--its institution by means of the spoken word--was a matter to which he attached unusual importance because he returned to it in Book IX, which contains the summation of the *Confutation*, and singled it out, with added emphasis, to put the finishing touches on his argument that *sola scriptura* amounts to a repudiation of the promises of perpetual presence made in Matthew 28:20 and John 16:13. For these reasons, in addition to the fact that it has a unifying effect in a work often noted for its disorderly sprawl, Book VI of the *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* merits renewed interest, and, in its light, so does the question of More's position on *sola scriptura*.

More stated in the *Responsio ad Lutherum* that *sola scriptura* was the begetter of many heresies (*multarum haeresum parentem*).⁸ The remark was made in the course of a discussion of Luther's position on scriptural proofs of the institution of sacraments, which More countered by making Luther seem to defy the witness of the apostles as well as Christ's promise to impart the spirit of truth.⁹ More's reasoning is that to renounce things unwritten is to claim for oneself the privilege of challenging all things, written and unwritten,

⁸ CW 5, 90/13, and two lines further: *Quem librum unquam scripsit ille, qui instituit omnia*. More's calculated representation is not exactly true to Luther's position on Biblical authority and must be seen in the light of modern scholarship having to do with Luther's hermeneutic. What Luther argued in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* is that things asserted without the authority of scripture may be held as opinion but are not required to be believed. See John M. Headley's illuminating remarks on Luther's quarrel with Henry VIII, and the affinity of More's position with Henry's, in "The Reformation as Crisis in the Understanding of Tradition," *Archive for Reformation History* 78 (1987), 8-13. See also David C. Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay on the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation* (Durham: Duke UP, 1980), 50-65; and Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (Yale UP, 1989), 168-74 and 250-54. For recent discussions of Luther and *sola scriptura*, see Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994), 109-23 and 166-7; Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: his Road to Reformation, 1483-1521*, trans. James L. Schaaf, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), I: 458; and Gogan, 86.

⁹ For More's difference with Luther over the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, see Headley, 13.

which is what accounts for the sense everywhere present in the *Responsio* that Luther's arrogance is outrageous. The same tendency toward prideful self-esteem is present in the Messenger of the *Dialogue concerning Heresies*, in which *sola scriptura* is seen, in a passage seldom noticed by students of More, as the begetter not of some but of all of Luther's heresies. In the 25th chapter of Book I More repeats one of the arguments of the *Responsio*, that *sola scriptura* is a prescription for spiritual anarchy because the proviso that necessary articles of faith must rest upon evident scripture reserves to the individual the judgment of those scriptures that are and those that are not evident. Speaking of extrascriptural matters commanded by God, More asserts that,

Luther sayth because it is not commanded by scripture, we maye choose therefore whether we will do it or leave it. For this one point is the very fond foundation and ground of all his great heresies / that a man is not bounden to believe anything but if it may be proven evidently by scripture. And thereupon goeth he so far forth / that no scripture can be evident to prove anything that he list [wills] to deny. For he will not agree it for evident be it never so plain. (CW 6, 148/33-149/4)

Evident scripture, it almost seems redundant to say, would reduce the Church's authority in all matters, including ritual, the sacraments, discipline, and the powers of the clergy, to a strictly biblical standard. That it offended More's humanist and philological instincts is also abundantly evident, but for reasons that are perhaps not so easily singled out. In both the *Responsio ad Lutherum* and the *Dialogue concerning Heresies* More raised caveats concerning things that, in effect, problematize the written word and by doing so may be seen as compromising the reformers' doctrine of evident scripture: the fact of lost writings, for example, and of texts corrupted by errors in transmission and translation. The writings of the apostles are translated incorrectly at times and at times ambiguously, he remarked in the *Responsio*; the Greek of the apostles, moreover, is not always faithfully represented in the Latin of the Vulgate, and for this and other reasons, there will never fail to be controversy over the matter of evident scriptures (CW 5, 101/1-4). Many writings are lost, he

wrote in the *Dialogue concerning Heresies*, and of those that are extant some are "corrupted with miswriting" (CW 6, 115/25). If anybody thinks the Church contradicted by scripture, "let him then as Saint Augustine sayth / make himself very sure that there is [not] some fault either in the translator / or in the writer / or nowadays in the printer / or finally that...he understandeth it not aright" (CW 6, 127/29-33).

However, what seems remarkable about More's deployment of the philological and textual arguments against *sola scriptura* is how much of their potential he could have exploited but chose not to.¹⁰ For some reasons that are and some that are not so evident, More chose not to pursue the many arguments based upon textual analysis that could have been used against the position that words in writing amount to infallible authority.¹¹ He no doubt thought that problematizing the written word was tantamount to problematizing certainty at a time when many of the orthodox were so obviously wavering; by the time the *Dialogue concerning Heresies* was in print,

he may well have thought that so much confusion had been sown, particularly by Tyndale's easily obtainable New Testament, that to open a discussion of textual variations could only be counter-productive.¹² Raising questions that mattered principally to Bible readers who possessed philological training, moreover, could be a tactical error for one who wished to assert that opponents of the Church were motivated by obstinacy or malice, not that they were innocently or ignorantly erring.¹³ For one who insisted upon the Church's unmistakable plainness in necessary matters, raising textual complications could be self-defeating. In addition, More could not logically wish to move in the direction of seeming to challenge the authority of the Vulgate, so much rested on it in the battle against the reformers. More knew only too well the consequences of attempting to impose emendations upon Jerome's Bible, having seen what happened to Erasmus, and he could not, of course, be seen to be tampering with it too extensively without compromising his stand against Tyndale's translations.¹⁴

¹⁰ More's brief discussions of textual matters in the *Responsio* and *Dialogue* constitute a footnote to the history of the intricate relations of philology, textual criticism, and theological conservatism in the early Reformation. For a sample of Erasmus' many contributions to the controversy, see *Correspondence of Erasmus* (U of Toronto, 1976), CWE 3: 70-1 and 134-6; CWE 4: 266-7; and CWE 7: 109-11. See also Jerry H. Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ* (Princeton UP, 1983). Particularly noteworthy among discussions of the philological issue are Erika Rummel's *Erasmus and his Catholic Critics*, 2 vols. (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf Publishers, 1989), I: 67-93, II: 17-22; *Erasmus' Annotations on the New Testament: From Philologist to Theologian* (U of Toronto P, 1986), 123-7; *The Humanist-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and Reformation* (Harvard UP, 1995), 126-52; and "The Importance of being Doctor: The Quarrel over Competency between Humanists and Theologians in the Renaissance," *Catholic Historical Review* 82 (1996), 187-203. For illuminating treatments of the spiritual objectives of Erasmian philology, see Mary Jane Barnett, "Erasmus and the Hermeneutics of Linguistic Praxis," *Renaissance Quarterly* 49 (1996), 542-72, and John F. McDiarmid, "Humanism, Protestantism, and English Scripture, 1533-1540," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 14 (1984), 121-38.

¹¹ However, that More often employed philological skills is obvious. See, for instance, Headley, 15, for his strategic use of the Old Latin rendering of Psalm 67:7 (*Deus qui facit unanimes in domo*) in preference to the Vulgate (*qui inhabitare facit unius moris in domo*) in a discussion of the doctrine of consensus.

¹² My argument that More is strategically restraining the potential use of philological arguments against *sola scriptura* receives support from his letter to Dorp (1515), which came at a time when the promotion of heresy through English translations of the Bible was far less a threat than it was after Tyndale's New Testament began arriving in England. The letter is a vigorous defense of Biblical textual study and of emendations, specifically, in some instances, against those who thought tampering with the Bible led to the erosion of faith and morals. The assumption underlying the textual discussions in the letter to Dorp is that the improvement of Jerome's Latin Bible through emendation fortifies and strengthens faith. See CW 15, 86/24-88/12.

¹³ This is supported by More's aim, stated in Book IV of the *Confutation*, of so evidently displaying the true Church that no child need stand in doubt (CW 8, 400/1-8). One of the rhetorical objectives in this was to remove the excuse of innocently erring, which he thought implied by Tyndale's doctrine of "feeling faith" (CW 8, 491/1-10). The manifest truth of the common, known Catholic Church, in other words, obviates the need to rely upon anything so intuitive, and therefore so susceptible to error, as Tyndale's feeling faith.

¹⁴ More criticizes Tyndale's translations in *Dialogue*, Book III, chapters 8 and 9; in Book III, chapter 16 he views with alarm the perils of the unlearned meddling with the high mysteries of scripture (blasphemy, divisiveness, heresies) but then admits the need for an authorized English version. More resumes his criticism of Tyndale's New Testament in *Confutation*, Book II (CW 8, 219/16-222/28), Book III

Nevertheless, while keeping his use of textual arguments against *sola scriptura* strictly under control, More amply demonstrated that philological skills could be effectively deployed against Tyndale's renderings, as when in Book III of the *Confutation* he challenged Tyndale's reading of John 5:34 (*I receive not testimony from man*), faulting him for misrepresenting the Greek original by omitting the English definite article that would have designated John the Baptist as the man to whom Christ referred (CW 8, 230/18-36). More's argument against Tyndale in this instance is that Christ was not categorically renouncing human authority. More's knowledge of Greek and Latin scriptures enabled him to dispute many of Tyndale's doctrinally charged translations, but he was aware in doing so that he ran the risk of seeming to embrace textual relativity and of defying the authority of the Vulgate. As Erika Rummel remarked, "humanists were often cast in the role of destroyers of Church authority."¹⁵ More was acutely aware of the risks. His criticism of Tyndale's translations and his objections to the reformers' uses of scripture illustrate the vexing divide between critical objectivity, perhaps best represented by Erasmus, and the application of criticism in the shaping of doctrinal positions. I believe the relatively limited use More made of philological and textual materials in his battle against *sola scriptura*

(CW 8, 230/1-242/29), and Book VII (CW 8, 685/302-690/12). More's assessments must, of course, be seen in the light of modern scholarship on Tyndale's translations. See the "Introduction" to David Daniell, ed., *Tyndale's New Testament* (Yale UP, 1987) and Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (Yale UP, 1994), 111-33; Patrick Collinson, "The Coherence of the Text: How it Hangeth Together: The Bible in Reformation England," in *The Bible, the Reformation, and the Church: Essays in Honour of James Atkinson*, ed. W.P. Stephens (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 84-7; and Heinz Holeczek, *Humanistische Bibelphilologie als Reformproblem bei Erasmus von Rotterdam, Thomas More, und William Tyndale* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), 246-78. On the philological dimension of More's dispute with Tyndale, including Tyndale's controversial use of "elder," "congregation," and "love," see Holeczek, 310-58; Germain Marc'hadour and Thomas M.C. Lawler, "Scripture in the Dialogue," CW 6, 494-525; and Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 267. On the doctrinal import of More's dispute with Tyndale over Biblical translation, see Janel M. Mueller, *The Native Tongue and the Word: Developments in English Prose Style, 1380-1580* (U of Chicago P, 1984), 177-83 and 206-9, and F.F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1978), 39-41.

¹⁵ Rummel, *Humanist-Scholastic Debate*, 126.

speaks eloquently of his sense of the dangers of undermining faith by creating complexities that might raise questions, encourage doubt, and lead troubled souls to perdition. Moreover, his awareness of orthodoxy's vulnerabilities, particularly in matters that rested on uncertain scriptural authority, was another incentive for imposing strict control on the philological arguments that could have been raised against *sola scriptura*.

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More had raised the question in Book II of the *Dialogue* whether the Church Christ founded antedated heretical factions and sects:

I speak of Christ's Church now as of that congregation that bearing his name, and having his right faith, and being begun to be gathered by himself and spread abroad by his apostles hath and doth and shall till his coming to the dreadful doom, continue still in this world; whether was this church before all the churches and congregations of heretics or some one of them before it? (CW 6, 193/11-17)

The Church of the present age, More was asserting, is one with the Church instituted by Christ, which is prior to all the sects of heretics as truth is prior to error. Moreover, in making known their separateness, heretical schismatics articulate not an act of departing but a condition of alienness. More's authority is 1 John 2:19: *E nobis profecti sunt sed non erant ex nobis*. Because in truth there can be no division, what appears to be an act of division, or schism, is an affirmation of the oneness against which heretics assert themselves. More's remarks on the priority of the true Church provoked a lengthy response in Tyndale's *An answer unto Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, which was completed perhaps before the end of 1530 though not published until late June the following year.<sup>16</sup> Both disputants knew

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<sup>16</sup> For circumstances of publication, see CW 8, 1231-34. The editions cited here are *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue... by William Tyndale*, ed. Henry Walter for the Parker Society (Cambridge UP, 1850), referred to as PS 3, and *The Independent Works of William Tyndale*, Vol. 3, *An Answer vnto Sir Thomas Mores Dialogue*, eds. Anne M. O' Donnell, S.N.D., and Jared Wicks, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), referred to as CUA 3. For a survey

that conflicting views on the true Church were what fundamentally divided them: More's assertion of the priority of the Church was answered by Tyndale's affirmation of the priority of the Gospels ("if the word beget the congregation, and he that begetteth is before him that is begotten, then is the gospel before the church").<sup>17</sup> Not only is the gospel in this sense prior to the Church, Tyndale held, and the scriptures therefore alone authoritative, but the apostles left no necessary matters unwritten. Many things were done that were not written, but the "pith and substance"

in general of every thing necessary unto our souls' health, both of what we ought to believe, and what we ought to do, was written; and of the miracles done to confirm it, as many as were needful: so that whatsoever we ought to believe or do, that same is written expressly, or drawn out of that which is written.<sup>18</sup>

On the basis of his belief in the extraordinary authority of the Bible, and of the Holy Spirit's presence therein, Tyndale built his repudiation of the things More had sought to defend in the *Dialogue*, including everything that Tyndale thought of as having human rather than divine origins--images, relics, pilgrimages, sacraments. The Protestant humanism that buttressed and reinforced Tyndale's sense of the historically relative, which included everything of human institution and foundation, led him, as well, to oppose with all the resources at his command everything that tended to compromise or occlude the oneness of God's word and the scriptural text. He therefore began his *Answer* to More's *Dialogue* with an attempt to demolish all doctrines and practices infected with ceremonialism, asserting that God does not dwell in temples or signs or tokens.

Before doing so, however, he turned to the second chapter of Book II of More's *Dialogue* and challenged More's argument that

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of the contents of Tyndale's *Answer*, see Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography*, 270-4. For brief comments on its theology, see Gogan, 172-3.

<sup>17</sup> PS 3, 24; CUA 3, 23/19-20.

<sup>18</sup> PS 3, 26; CUA 3, 24/24-30.

before there were divisive heresies there had to have been one infallible Church, unified and endowed with the Spirit of truth. Against More's assertion of the priority of the true Church Tyndale held that the scribes and Pharisees whom Christ condemned in Matthew 16 and 23 constituted evidence of the priority of heretical factions. There must have been heresies before Christ, Tyndale reasoned, because Christ repudiated the scriptural interpretations and ceremonialism of the Pharisees when he instituted his Church; and as Christ and the apostles turned their backs upon the degenerate ways of these heretical factions, the reformers of the present day were turning their backs upon a Church overtaken by popish hypocrites.<sup>19</sup> It must be noted that Tyndale and More have fallen into a dispute over the exact standing of scribes and Pharisees according to the Gospel of Matthew and over the correct reading of their renunciation by Christ, but not, precisely, over the existence of the Church since the beginning of time. That God continued his congregation «from Adam to Noe, and from Noe to Abraham» Tyndale does not, of course, deny; furthermore, Tyndale pleaded, there were stories that testified to the existence of writing even before Noah, to say nothing of the testaments of the rainbow and circumcision, which further supported his inference of the Church's origins in the epochs before Christ.<sup>20</sup>

The heart of the matter, then, was not the Church's apocalyptic encompassing of time and eternity, nor was it the historical presence of the Church throughout the epochal divisions *ante legem*, *sub lege*, and *sub gratia*. On these things More and Tyndale were in agreement. Rather, Tyndale had taken More's statement that before there were heresies there was one Church under Christ and turned it around, arguing that there were heresies prior to Christ's temporally bounded act of instituting the Church, because he sought a pretext for arguing

<sup>19</sup> For Luther's very similar position, see Headley, 19.

<sup>20</sup> PS 3, 26-7; CUA 3, 25/19-28. That Luther dated the beginning of the Church from God's promise of the woman's seed who would bruise the head of the serpent, see Edwards, *Luther and the False Brethren* (Stanford UP, 1975), 114-15; that More dated it from prelapsarian Eden, see Book IX of the *Confutation* (CW 8, 1007/33ff.). For Alistair Fox's illuminating remarks on this passage, see *Thomas More: History and Providence* (Yale UP, 1983), 151-2.

that the reformers, by renouncing the Catholic Church, were re-enacting Christ's renunciation of heretical scribes and Pharisees. More had argued in apocalyptic terms in Book II of the *Dialogue*, but, for strategic reasons, Tyndale was arguing in chronological terms. More had asserted the Church's oneness throughout time and eternity, but Tyndale was tracing a specific chronological sequence of events. Tyndale argued that the true Church, in the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was "great in faith, and small in number," but it declined in faith until the time of Moses, when God restored his people once more to the right way, inaugurating the era of the law. The Church declined again under the law, when, "against the coming of Christ,"

the scribes, Pharisees, Caiphas, Annas, and the elders, were crept up into the seat of Moses, Aaron, and the holy prophets and patriarchs, and succeeded them lineally, and had the scripture of God but even in captivity, to make merchandise of it, and to abuse it unto their own glory and profit. And though they kept the people from outward idolatry of worshipping of images with the heathen, yet they brought them into a worse inward idolatry . . . and taught the people to believe in the works self, and had corrupte the scripture with false glosses: as thou mayest see in the gospel, how Christ warneth his disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which was their false doctrine and glosses.<sup>21</sup>

In the era of the law, the Church fell into errors endemic to the power of teachers--ritual correctness, barren formalism--which take away the key of knowledge. These, Tyndale protested, are the errors being fostered by our popish hypocrites, who suppress the literal meaning of scripture and, by imposing upon the people the primacy of their authority and power of performing sacraments, enforce priestly monopoly. Tyndale is attempting to make More seem misleading in asserting that there was a true Church before there were heretics because Tyndale wishes to restore the emphasis to Christ's reforming work of demolishing previous errors and of restoring the Church to a true sense of scripture and to the faith and living of the patriarchs and

prophets. The patriarchal model was defiled by ritual accretions under the law, Tyndale believed, and as Christ endeavored to restore the truth and faith of the patriarchs, he asserts, so the reformers are endeavoring to restore the faith and living of Christ and the apostles:

as they which depart from the faith of the true church are heretics, even so they that depart from the church of heretics and false feigned faith of hypocrites, are the true church; which thou shalt alway know by their faith, examined by the scripture, and by their profession and consent to live according unto the laws of God.<sup>22</sup>

To counter the emphasis Tyndale had placed on Christ's reforming work and to put the matter of inerrancy back at the center of the dispute, More professed to see in Tyndale's *Answer* a renunciation of the promises of Matthew 28:20 and John 16:13. If Tyndale could be made to seem to defy these texts, then he could be made to seem to renounce the doctrine of apostolic continuity and Christ's oneness with the Church. What Tyndale was saying implied that God had permitted the Church to persist in damnable error for fifteen hundred years, which was as impossible, More believed, as leaving it to be solely dependent for its salvation upon written documents. Nothing, More was sure, could so preposterously affront both scripture and the Church, to say nothing of reason, tradition, and the providential basis of human history. As More knew, the apocalyptic promises recorded in the Gospels signified the intervention of eternity in human history.<sup>23</sup> The Church Christ

<sup>22</sup> PS 3, 45; CUA 3, 43/15-20.

<sup>23</sup> This point is indirectly hinted at by Marius, who, while grasping its obvious features ("that the world and history must mean something important in terms of an eternal and cosmic drama"), did not notice either its underlying typology or the significance of Book VI in More's handling of it. I find dubious the implication that the apocalyptic typology underlies "all the book" (that is, all the *Confutation*); it does not precisely come into focus until Book VI. Moreover, Marius' remarks concerning "the overwhelming and fearful mystery of God" in his discussion of More's postnominalist perspective, while plausible, are presented in a way that tends to obscure a central tenet of More's view of the Incarnation: that it was God's intent in sending His Son to make truth manifest, self-evident, and inescapable. Finally, in his discussion of erroneousness, Marius omits More's views on its typology. See Richard

<sup>21</sup> PS 3, 43; CUA 3, 41/1-15.

founded and the new epoch born with his advent were indivisible. One could not, therefore, defy the institutional Church and its consecrated priesthood, as Tyndale was doing in many ways but particularly by holding exclusively to the written word, without defying the Gospel promises of Christ's perpetual presence. It was not possible for More to contemplate, without being appalled, a creed that so catastrophically emptied human history of direction and purpose.

He therefore undertook to demolish Tyndale's interpretation of the institution of the Church, and in doing so he discovered the beginnings of what turned out to be an important feature of his argument against *sola scriptura*. This was the argument that, by displacing the covenant of the law, the covenant of faith under Christ had the effect of nullifying any distinctive significance inhering in its legalistic medium, the written word. Because More's *Confutation* is a massive assault on Tyndale's ecclesiology, it seems advisable at this point, before raising the matter of Tyndale's views on biblical authority, to glance briefly at the structural framework of the *Confutation*, particularly with regard to the place of Book VI therein. This immense diatribe with its reputation for bitter intemperance, underneath its apparent disorderliness, has a unity based on the object of its invective, that is, Tyndale's ecclesiology, against which the main arguments of the *Confutation's* nine books are arrayed. "The very breast of all this battle," More wrote in the preface to the *Confutation*, is "the question: Which is the Church" (CW 8, 34/30-1). Thus, in Book I, More assaults Tyndale's position on sacraments, asserting their validity not only as signs of grace but also as marks of the incorporateness of Christian peoples; in the second, he disputes Tyndale's translation of the New Testament, singling out particularly the use of "congregation" for *ecclesia* and arguing that "congregation" abolishes the element of unity that was affirmed by the apostles and evangelists; and in the third, he first overturns Tyndale's argument of the anteriority of the word to the Church and then disputes Tyndale's

assertion that nothing necessary to salvation was left unwritten by the apostles.

These first three books, published in the spring of 1532, constitute the *Confutation's* first installment; the second, published a year later and containing Books IV through VIII, was More's first polemical work after resigning the chancellorship and in certain ways charts new courses in the doctrinal aspects of his battle with reform.<sup>24</sup> In Book IV, in which More ridicules Tyndale's "feeling faith" and demeans it as a pretext for erring with impunity, he draws the contrast, by now a wholly predictable refrain in the *Confutation*, between Tyndale's church and the Catholic Church, the former invisible and divided, and the latter indubitably known in its institutional continuity and its oneness with the teachings of the apostles. In the conspicuously brief fifth book (only a fraction of the average length of the other eight), More offers a definition of the Church--the whole corps and body of spiritual and temporal in all Christian nations with one head, the pope--in phrasing that makes it obvious that Tyndale is confusing the question of authority by compounding two separate matters, the Church's constitution and the position of the pope at its head. By doing so, More concludes, Tyndale evades the question of the true Church, pretending that the Catholic Church and pontifical authority are identical. Book VI, then, contains More's most extensively scriptural analysis of Tyndale's ecclesiology. Its argument rests upon a framework of illogical implications drawn from Tyndale's attempt to portray Christ as a reformer and the Catholic clergy as Pharisaical, and it incorporates Cyprian's *De unitate* in an attempt to brand reform with the sin of schism.

More's strategy in Book VI is to overthrow Tyndale's assertion that heretical sects preceded the true Church on the grounds that heresy can be defined only by its opposition to truth, which must, therefore, logically and chronologically precede it. To argue otherwise, as Tyndale had done, was to diminish the act by which the Church was instituted by denying its universality and catholicity. "I

Marius, "Thomas More's View of the Church," CW 8, 1271, 1272-2, 1336-9. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (U of Chicago P, 1971), discusses the apocalyptic beginnings of Christian theology. See particularly p. 123.

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For the history of composition and publication, see CW 8, 1419-27.

am with you myself unto the world's end" (Mt. 28:20). The synagogue was the true Church *sub lege*. When he comes to its displacement, More envisions "a new church of a new fashion, of another manner of perfection" (CW 8, 613/10). By virtue of Christ's presence therein he affirms that it overcomes all impediments to the indubitable possession of redeeming truth, and in this affirmation More was led to grasp first the reasoning by which schism was held by Cyprian to be irremissible and second the foundation of his opposition to the argument of evident scripture: when Christ annihilated uncertainty he annihilated false doctrine--and this included false teachings in the Patriarchal and Mosaic as well as the Pharisaical ages and the present age, the age of Luther, Zwingli, Barnes, and Tyndale--and the errors thus annihilated encompassed the misrepresentations and misconstructions that are made inevitable by exclusive adherence to written words.

Because it was instrumental in More's analysis of schism, Cyprian's *De unitate* underlies most of the thinking of Book VI, and it provides the foundation of a typological framework that More constructs for the purpose of categorizing schismatics, ancient as well as contemporary. It is noteworthy that More, as he made a point of confessing, had only recently regarded certain crucial matters in *De unitate*. He indicated early in Book VI that his discussion of heretical sects in the *Dialogue*, Book II, chapter 2--the chapter singled out by Tyndale to dispute his claim that the vine of the true Church came before heretical branches--was undertaken without the benefit of Cyprian's *De unitate*. In the *Dialogue* More had adduced certain scriptures on this point, including, he observed, some that Cyprian had marked, but "not all the places of scripture that he layeth for that purpose, because I had not at that time read and marked Saint Cyprian upon that point" (CW 8, 603/14-16). More seems to have been saying that at some time after commencing his dispute with Tyndale--perhaps during the year-long interval between the first and second installments of the *Confutation*--he had hit upon something noteworthy, thanks to Cyprian, and it seems to have been that the particular iniquity of the sin of schism is justification for its being condemned categorically.

The main thrust of *De unitate* is the Church's oneness. It is not possible to defy the sacrament of unity (*sacramentum unitatis*) to which St. Paul referred (*unus Dominus, una fides, unum baptisma*) without defying Christ.<sup>25</sup> On this authority Cyprian denounced schismatics *in toto*; divisive teaching cannot, by its nature, escape being erroneous because by definition it asserts itself against the Church's God-given, apostolic unity. Schismatics are known, without exception, for teaching error under pretext of the faith and Antichrist under the name of Christ (*perfidiam sub praetextu fidei, antichristum sub vocabulo Christi*).<sup>26</sup> Schismatics mislead and mark themselves as already cursed, and their sin is not erased even by martyrdom (*inexpiabilis et gravis culpa discordiae nec passione purgatur*).<sup>27</sup> Because schism is a rebellion against the mystery of unity, it is inescapably a rebellion, at the same time, against the head and source of indivisibility in Christ. The appropriate figure of unity--a vine and its branches--signifies Christ's mystical body, whose temporal dimension is God's undiminished presence in time. The linking of past and future is revealed in Christ, and the course of human history is seen as a process resembling an unfolding in which the truth disclosed is one with God's manner of disclosing. The unquestionable obviousness of this unity, the interior and unmistakable unity of vine and branches, makes error depraved and unforgivable.<sup>28</sup> It also makes manifest the impossibility of impairing the unity; schism is by its nature anomalous. "Christ's church can be but one" (CW 8, 604/9).

<sup>25</sup> MPL 4, 516.

<sup>26</sup> MPL 4, 512. John M. Headley thirty years ago anticipated the argument More derived from Cyprian's *De unitate*: in explaining how he could claim that Lutheranism stemmed from Wyclif, Headley wrote that More conceived of heresy as "substantially one and the same throughout all time with inconsequential distinctions and variations." More, in other words, viewed schismatics categorically. See "Thomas More and Luther's Revolt," *Archive for Reformation History* 60 (1969), 152.

<sup>27</sup> MPL 4, 526.

<sup>28</sup> For an earlier instance of More's use of vine and branches, [John 15:1f] in the context of excommunication, see the *Dialogue concerning Heresies*, (CW 6, 146/24 and 194/4-22).

Schismatics, therefore, render themselves eternally separate and lead others into error. Because it continues in later ages to drag down others, the ill effects of divisive error are perpetual. All hope, for schismatics, is lost. Cyprian's message is exemplified in the figures of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, who in the sixteenth chapter of Numbers are said to have defied Moses and Aaron and for their sins were swallowed alive in a deep abyss.

Nec tantum eos qui auctores fuerant Dei indignantis ira percussit, sed et caeteros ducentos quinquaginta participes ejusdem furoris et comites, qui coagulati cum iisdem simul ad audaciam fuerant, exiens a Domino ignis properata ultione consumpsit, admonens scilicet et ostendens contra Deum fieri quidquid improbi fuerint ad destruendam ordinationem Dei humana voluntate conati.<sup>29</sup>

Not only were the principal agents struck by the fury of God's anger, but their two hundred and fifty associates and followers who had joined them in the same wild outrage, were summarily punished: they were consumed by the fire that was evoked by the Lord. This was to warn us and show that any attempt made by the wicked deliberately to frustrate the appointment of God, is done against God Himself.

As More saw it, Tyndale was misreading Christ's renunciation of heretical and divisive factions; he was erring extravagantly in attempting to represent his renunciation of the Church as a re-enacting of Christ's renunciation of scribes and Pharisees. According to More's reasoning, when Tyndale portrayed the Catholic clergy as pharisaical usurpers, he involved himself in a renunciation of apostolicity. He was attempting to rupture and decenter the thing that made More's faith sure and undeniable, the fact that there was no seam in the *unwritten* fabric of continuity and indivisibility that made the life of the Church in time one with the things spoken by Christ and heard by the apostles. This is the message of *De unitate*. On its

<sup>29</sup> MPL 4, 530. For the English translation, see Maurice Bevenot, S.J., trans., *St. Cyprian: The Lapsed. The Unity of the Catholic Church* (New York: Newman Press, n.d.), 60.

strength, More could now paint Tyndale with the brush used by Cyprian to paint the schismatics who defied the authority of Moses. Whether More knew it or not, the fact that the doctrine of apostolic continuity antedated the determination of the canon of the New Testament is something that would have weighed in his favor.<sup>30</sup> As More viewed the matter, Tyndale's claim to be a successor of Christ could only be seen, at the very least, as an expression of monstrous arrogance. By renouncing the Gospel promise of Christ's living presence, Tyndale was defying, at the same time, the materialization of truth in human form.

More therefore seized the opportunity of grouping Tyndale among other schismatic adversaries of providence, and for this purpose he constructed in Book VI of the *Confutation* a set of correspondences linking the epoch before and the epoch following the institution of the covenant of grace. There was a true and known church *sub lege*, as well as *sub gratia*. The critical distinction is that before God assumed human form the way leading to truth was so hard ("the thing had then so great difficulty") that many souls were lost owing to the conditions, the circumstances, of spiritual endeavor ("many for lack of sufficient diligence perished").<sup>31</sup> However, in the

<sup>30</sup> More could have cited Tertullian as well as Cyprian on the matter of doctrinal truth and indivisibility. I am indebted for this discussion of apostolicity to Robert B. Eno's remarkable study, "Ecclesia Docens: Structures of Doctrinal Authority in Tertullian and Vincent," *Thomist* 40 (1976), 104-5. Pelikan examines the continuity of apostolic teaching, and offers a sensible caveat against superimposing second- and third-century categories on sixteenth-century controversies, in *Emergence*, 114-5.

<sup>31</sup> This is not an entirely new theme in the *Confutation*. Earlier, in Book III, More had asserted that Moses received laws in writing but that, in addition, "there remained in the people's minds beside the writing diverse things necessary and of great weight, that they had received before, and kept peradventure from Adam's own days/concerning the coming of Christ" (CW 8, 366/1-9). In other words, the true church *sub lege* is only partially present in the written commendments; the law, when considered in itself, apart from the truth "in the people's minds," is therefore in a certain sense elliptical and not entirely sufficient for salvation. Fox noticed More's discussion of this idea in a later context--Book IX of the *Confutation* (CW 8, 1009/5-22)--but failed to detect the fuller discussion in Book VI and therefore missed the typological significance. See Fox, 152.

Incarnation truth became luminously self-evident, and in its light error is seen to acquire the attributes of willfulness, depravity, and obstinacy. An exact and unconditional distinction is drawn between erring innocently and erring maliciously. More seems to be saying that the former, at least in things necessary, ceases to be an option once the epoch of the law is displaced by a new covenant under Christ. In the epoch *sub lege*, there were many false teachers and many who erred innocently, but there were true teachers as well; in the present age of malicious error we have the writings of the Church's learned doctors, who are marked by miracles, and the mutually confirming effect of their writings and the teachings of the apostles. What More seems to be saying is that the new covenant of grace is distinguished from that of the law in the sense that, under the former, one might err innocently, but to defy the Church's guidance in the resolution of doubt evinces perverse obstinacy. Under the law, souls were lost through the difficulty of knowing the truth; under grace, there is no such excuse.

What More had seen is that the war of truth and error is fundamentally altered. "Of his great mercy" God, therefore,

suffered not those naughty scribes and false Pharisees to continue long but to make an easy way in which no man could be deceived except such as were over negligent or malicious, but should soon be learned [taught] the sure truth and undoubted way to heaven, sent his own son to begin a new church of a new fashion, of another manner of perfection, in which he would so be present and assistant forever himself and his own Holy Spirit, and so teach it and so lead it into every truth, that no man could be deceived, but he that would not believe his church and he would make his church so open and so well known that no man could but know it, except such as of malice would not know it. (CW 8, 613/5-16)

Under the law, the Jews' synagogue, More wrote, was "the very church and a church also known," although it was reduced by errors and factional divisions to a scarcity of faith and virtue (617/5-7). However, in the Church instituted by Christ, although "as long as it

dwelleth in earth there shall be many nought," the truth is "so good and so sure,"

that unto those that shall be well willing to learn the truth, it shall always be known where they may learn it, and that for the clearing of all doubts and avoiding of all errors, it shall ever be true to say that the church is, as Saint Paul says, the pillar and the foot or ground [1 Tim 3:15], that is to say the sure strength or fastening of the truth. (CW 8, 617/13-19)

God's love led him, when his people were being misled by false teachers, to make truth manifest and unmistakable by merging humanity and deity in the person of Jesus. Truth is made unmistakable because, in the terms of More's argument, in a single action God becomes visible and Christ's presence is known in his Church. The promises of Matthew 28:22 and John 16:13 are at once and for all time fulfilled. Truth, in other words, is spoken by one whose sayings embrace the beginning and end of time; this is why Christ's advent is the hinge on which history turns, making the true Church logically and spiritually anterior to all erring and heretical sects and divisions. Many were lost under the law for lack of understanding because under the law truth and faith were present, but truth was not incarnate. There was therefore no assurance of infallibly reading the significance of history's unfolding in the sense of reading it providentially, which is made possible by Christ's living presence. It is not that error is overthrown when truth acquires human dimensions in the Incarnation, or that error *per se* becomes irremissible, but that uncertainty--perplexity--ceases to be a condition sufficient for error. Something more is required, malice or obstinacy, to keep error from being innocent. By denying the instrument by which God made it possible to read correctly--to read, moreover, infallibly--one places oneself, as More believed Tyndale to be doing, in a world of division, doubt, Pharisaical rectitude, Lutheran eccentricity, polluted discourse, and the inevitable misconstructions that occur in the translation and transmission of the written word.

Under the law, which More is encouraging the reader to associate with written documents, dubiety prevailed and innocent errors were numerous. Under Christ, in the new covenant that More

would have us associate with speaking and hearing, truth is self-evident and errors are either obstinate or malicious. There are false teachers under the new as well as the old law--deviant, esoteric, dissenting. Under the old law there were virtuous doctors by whose expositions of scripture "the false doctrine of the noughty scribes and evil Pharisees" was exposed and condemned, and in succeeding ages, *sub gratia*, there are old holy fathers by whose authority the errors of reformers are tried and shown to be divisive (CW 8, 612/17-20).

By failing to read correctly the epoch extending from the time of Moses to that of Christ, Tyndale failed to grasp the significance of the time "in which by God's own ordinance, the Jews' church or synagogue should have an end" and Christ and his apostles were to begin, as it was prophesied, "a perpetual church without end, against which the gates of hell should never prevail" (CW 8, 606/36-607/18). Tyndale was guilty of fatally misinterpreting Jeremiah 31:33, which More repeatedly invoked to distinguish the old law written and the new law under Christ, which was neither received nor delivered in writing.<sup>32</sup> The text in Jeremiah also affirms the truth of St. Paul's admonition that no one confesses Christ but by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3), which is one of several Pauline texts underlying More's view that the peculiar mode of the truth under Christ is speaking and hearing. God provided especially that the people should hear the truth by the mouth of the clergy, in this way assuring that the word would be written infallibly in the people's hearts. Echoing Romans 10: 14-15, More wrote, "Faith is made by hearing. And how shall a man hear without preaching? And how shall a man preach but if he be sent to preach?" (CW 8, 615/6-9). By these means, performed by the apostles and their indisputable successors in the clergy of the common and known Catholic Church, the Holy Spirit leads the people--unerringly and unmistakably--to all truth.

<sup>32</sup> CW 8, 615/25-33. More discusses God's ways with his people before scripture was written in Book III, chapter 1 of the *Dialogue concerning Heresies*, where he explains that the Holy Spirit, which makes the Church "all of one mind and accord," guided the faithful in determining which writings were and which were not holy scripture (CW 6, 253/21-33).

Tyndale's position on scriptural authority is therefore reduced to implied assumptions that can be exploited for damningly negative implications. To adhere exclusively to written words, by denying God's promise to be present in his Church, is to turn one's back on the new covenant of grace and to affirm God's absence. To so exalt Biblical authority is to take authority away from Augustine, Jerome, and all the other inspired writers of the first few centuries after Christ, as well as the prophets and patriarchs; it is, moreover, to cancel and obliterate the providential dimension in history, to say nothing of Christian charity and of the witness of the Church in this world.

A dramatic and amusing feature of Book VI of the *Confutation* is More's irrepressible genius for inventing fictions intended to turn his adversaries' arguments into absurdity. Imagine, he begs of us, Pharisaical Jerusalem transported into sixteenth century Europe. Imagine Luther as John the Baptist. What if the Jewish factions that flourished under the law were flourishing among us now? How would we know the truth? Nothing, of course, would be altered. The unity of revelation would still prevail. If Tyndale would portray Luther as another St. John--"a voice of one crying in the desert"--then must he reveal by what prophecy God is said to "rear up a friar that should wed a nun, and from an harlot's bed step up into the pulpit and preach" (CW 8, 651/20-22). The Church's continuity is being assailed, More is telling us, and history, as a result, is being disordered.

Imagine, furthermore, Tyndale as having been born in Jerusalem, circumcised, and "four years before the birth of Christ" subjected to a bewildering profusion of sects and factions--scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Levites, priests, lay people--all severed assunder in things they held damnable as well as small things.

What would Tyndale have done in this case? Would he without any other reader have taken the books of their scriptures into his own hand / and thereof without any credence given unto any man, pick out the truth by himself? he should have therein a very hard work / and were very likely to frame himself a new faith in many great things, agreeing with no man but with himself. (CW 8, 619/22-25)

The underlying analogy is of the bewildering profusion of Pharisaical sects and the multiplied heresies for which Tyndale, Barnes, and the others are responsible in contemporary England. Imagine, More is saying to Tyndale, the myopia-inducing isolation imposed by the strictures of individual interpretation; imagine one who is screened and confined by his own reading of the scriptural text, and you will see in the inevitability of damnable error, under conditions being imposed by you and the other heretics, a rebirth of the dubiety and erroneousness that prevailed from the time of Moses to that of Christ. Individual interpretation and its underlying doctrine of *sola scriptura* enforce separateness; it shatters unity, and it is therefore anathema.

In a forceful peroration More acknowledges that his argument against Tyndale is not original; it is a reconstruction. It was the "invincible martyr Saint Cyprian" who framed the themes of the church's oneness and everlastingness that More stands upon in his defense of Christian unity (CW 8, 673/8).

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