

Georg Major on Church Fathers and Councils

by IRENE DINGEL

In 1550 Georg Major, a student of Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon and subsequently their colleague on the Wittenberg theological faculty, published a work in which he discussed whether the church fathers and councils are capable of erring, *De origine et autoritate verbi Dei* [*On the Origin and Authority of God's Word*].¹ In fact, when Major wrote this analysis, that particular issue had long since become a moot point among adherents of the Wittenberg Reformation. Against the views of the medieval Western church and in line with other reformers, Luther had maintained the fallibility of the ancient fathers and called into question the authority that had been accorded them.² In general, the reformers expressed grave doubts regarding the authority of the “tradition,” which they regarded as fundamentally resting on human institution, and they viewed Holy Scripture as the only valid norm for faith and doctrine. Nevertheless, they continued to make use of traditional medieval elements, including appropriate statements of the church fathers and decisions of church councils.

In the early sixteenth century, it was common for the Wittenberg reformers to refer to the ancient fathers, above all, in their doctrinal controversies with their Roman, Zwinglian, and “Enthusiastic” (*Schwärmer*) opponents regarding the Lord's Supper. After Luther died, there were also controversies among Protestants themselves regarding Christological issues and how they related to the Lord's Supper. Every single party—whether medieval or reformational, whether Lutheran, Philippist, or Calvinist—based its conviction on Matthew 28:20, John 14:16–26, and John 15:26; they all agreed that the continuous efficacy of the Holy Spirit had preserved the church in centuries past and had sustained it throughout all the assaults on its integrity.³ As such, this is one of the reasons why the reformers strove to refer to “the tradition” as they formulated their own doctrine. Their goal was to preserve the ancient, original, and thus pure

doctrine and to protect it against novel teachings that were anchored neither in history nor in proper theological argument. As such, both the first and second generation of reformers regarded themselves as interpreters of tradition, while clinging to the indisputable norm of Holy Scripture as the basis for their orientation. This enabled them to ensure a correct and authentic understanding of the statements of traditionally cited church fathers and councils.

These were the presuppositions for the development of an Evangelical understanding of tradition by the reformers.⁴ They not only chose those church fathers and councils whose statements and decisions could prove helpful for the defense of their own position vis-à-vis the argument of their opponents. Beyond that, the reformers also took into consideration the entire developments through which traditional teachings had been formulated in their historical context. To be sure, the various theologians of the past whom they selected were not just taken over without critical assessment, but they were analyzed and weighted individually. One of the pioneers in this process during this period was Georg Major, a key Philippist, professor at Wittenberg, co-editor of the works of Martin Luther, and a protagonist of the Majorist controversy.⁵ Major belongs to that particular generation of students of Luther and Melancthon who systematically processed the legacy of their two teachers. In his treatise *De origine et auctoritate verbi Dei* he set the stage for how the Evangelicals were to develop their understanding of tradition. The fact that Major raised anew the question of whether church fathers and councils were capable of erring was based on his willingness to adopt the *consensus catholicus*⁶ as, in his own words, a “secondary norm” for faith and doctrine—under the Holy Scriptures. This essay will shed light on how the Evangelicals developed their understanding of tradition by posing the following questions: 1) What are the preliminary steps and the background of Major’s composition of an Evangelical understanding of tradition? 2) What level of authority did Georg Major ascribe to the church fathers and what role did they play in the life of the church? 3) In the course of his treatise, in which contexts does Major turn to the church fathers in his argumentation?

Preliminary Steps

De origine et autoritate verbi Dei was not the first work in integrating the church fathers into the theology of the Reformation in a comprehensive way, since the Wittenberg reformers had *de facto* made use of patristic authorities for quite some time. But Major in this work expanded the theoretical background of why the fathers had been put to use. Major—as Melanchthon’s student—had already engaged the thought of the church fathers rather intensively for several years. At the behest of Luther, Major published an edition of the *Vitae Patrum* in 1544,⁷ for which Luther himself had written a prologue.⁸ This book was extraordinarily popular into the eighteenth century. In a translation entitled *Leben der Altväter* [*Lives of the Ancient Fathers*], these biographies of the saints also became available in German.⁹ Furthermore, editions were also issued in Italian, French, and Dutch,¹⁰ a testimony to the fact that Major’s work was becoming increasingly popular in Western Europe—an impact of Major’s work that is not to be underestimated. In his edition of the *Vitae Patrum*, Major took material from Rufinus’ *Historia monachorum*,¹¹ although he *did* omit Rufinus’s fable-like narratives, along with any *vitae* which mainly focused on issues that had become irrelevant for Reformation theology, such as fasting. On the other hand, Major integrated into his collection additional *vitae* not presented by Rufinus, such as the *Vita Antonii* by Athanasius, as well as anonymous biographies of saints, some of which had perhaps been revised by medieval editors. As far as the reformers were concerned, the criteria for circulating these biographies of the church fathers had changed from those criteria used by medieval authors—despite the fact that, when one analyzes his text carefully, Major hardly edited or corrected the content of the individual *vitae*. In general, the *Vitae* remained to a very large extent in the form in which they had originally been composed.

There were two reasons why the *Vitae Patrum* continued to circulate. Not only were the lives of the people described deemed to be exemplary, meritorious, and thus worthy of imitation; their sinfulness also made them highly dependent on the free grace of God—a point that was explicitly stressed by Luther and his followers. In this

way, from an Evangelical point of view, the *Vitae Patrum* had not only a didactical purpose but also served to support pastoral care and consolation. The *Vitae* were a precursor to the martyr books, which were to become very popular in Calvinist regions.¹² Already on the level of popular piety a fundamentally new way of regarding the fathers and an altered, reformational way of putting the tradition to use was taking form.

The need to adopt new ways to appropriate the tradition and re-evaluate its use was even more urgent in the area of theology. This need was actually triggered by the Council of Trent and the Augsburg Interim. In a decree adopted in its fourth session, on April 8, 1546, regarding the Holy Scriptures and tradition,¹³ the Council of Trent resolved that divine truth was to be determined from two sources, namely, Holy Scripture and tradition, with tradition being determined by the *continua successio* of teaching as preserved in the church. Furthermore, it was declared that tradition was to be venerated as much as Holy Scriptures, of which God is the author. The Council determined that “all books of the Old and New Testaments . . . not less those traditions . . . which were spoken by Christ or dictated by the Holy Spirit and preserved in continuation succession in the catholic church, [were to be regarded with] equal reverence and feelings of piety.”¹⁴ No one should dare interpret Holy Scripture contrary to the understanding guaranteed by the church or contrary to the unanimous *consensus patrum* [consensus of the fathers].¹⁵ In this way, the *consensus patrum* was, so to say, officially pronounced as the norm of how to understand and interpret Holy Scripture. It is against this background that we must view Major as he discusses the following three issues in his writings: 1) Can the church fathers and councils err? 2) How does one go about reaching decisions in synods? 3) What is the gift of interpretation?¹⁶

Major compared the *consensus patrum* to the *catholicus consensus*,¹⁷ which is bound to uncorrupted scriptural truth that has been passed on by the apostles and prophets to the church. It is in complete agreement with Scripture.¹⁸ The *catholicus consensus* is based on the *analogia fidei* [rule of faith].¹⁹ The rule of faith must bind the statements of the fathers to the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures. This rule of faith serves as the test of all those who later bear the

tradition, the fathers, bishops, and councils. Major affirmed, "Finally, no interpretation of Scripture is to be accepted which does not agree with the writings of the Apostles and of the Prophets, which is not in accord with the rule of faith. Just as he is the author [of the Holy Scriptures], so the Holy Spirit is also the only interpreter of their teaching. Against this Word the authority of no one can claim validity, holiness, or dignity. At this point the fathers, the popes, the bishops, councils, princes, kings, emperors, and even the angels must yield because the command and Word of God must be preferred over all creatures."²⁰

In 1548 the Augsburg Interim promulgated a position similar to that of the Council of Trent as binding in the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. In its Article 10 the following attributes were cited as distinguishing characteristics which "dissidents and heretics" do not possess and which, conversely, are *signa ecclesiae* [marks of the church]: *perpetuus sanctorum consensus ab apostolis usque ad nos* [the perpetual consensus of the saints from the apostles down to us],²¹ universality, and catholicity, among other things. These attributes are expressed in the continuous succession that began with the apostles and continued all the way down to that day.²² According to the Augsburg Interim, the church has the authority to distinguish between true and false writings²³ since it was embedded in the complete line of succession—the handing down of the tradition. As it stated in Article 11, "by means of the bishops [the church] has passed on countless teachings from Christ and the apostles all the way down to us." Anyone who denies this passing on of the tradition was at the same time doubting that "the church is a pillar and foundation of truth," as stated in 1 Timothy 3:15.²⁴ This was a topic that Major, working together with Melancthon on the Leipzig "Proposal" (dubbed the "Leipzig Interim" by its critics), addressed in his treatise.²⁵ The Leipzig "Proposal" had not contained a detailed article on the doctrine of the church. In his treatise Major presumed that the concept of revelation is also to be understood in terms of the content of what Scripture teaches. As such, the revelation of God, which takes form in Holy Scripture, is to be equated with the *doctrina coelestis* [heavenly doctrine].²⁶ Against this background, Major insists that the teaching of the church has been "handed down" by

God himself by means of divine direction or providence. As such, the continuous living voice of divine teaching—*vox celestis doctrinae*—that proceeds *prima voce* from God's Son before the beginning of time,²⁷ was never silenced, and the church itself has been miraculously carried forth across the centuries as an agent of this doctrine. After his ascension, Christ then sent apostles, prophets, saints, and scholars, through whom true doctrine was fanned into flame and then disseminated.²⁸ Consistent with this view is the fact that, in his treatise, Major compiled a *Catalogus Doctorum Ecclesiae Dei* ["Catalog of the Doctors of the Church of God"], primarily to strengthen the faith of readers rather than to provide a list of impeccable authorities.²⁹ As such, as did Melanchthon and Luther, Major began with the first man and—in contrast to Luther—distinguished five millennia in human history,³⁰ with five *ordines doctorum ecclesiae* [orders of doctors of the church]. These were the fathers before the Flood, the patriarchs, the prophets, the political rulers and priests of Israel, and, finally, as the fifth order—starting with Christ himself—the apostles, prophets, evangelists, bishops, *pastores* and *doctores*—all the way down to the present time.³¹ But, similar to Luther and Melanchthon,³² Major saw a break around the time of Pope Gregory the Great, during whose tenure the pure teaching of the church was more and more overgrown with human traditions. Correspondingly, in the short biographical commentaries presented in his treatise, Major noted things about the lives and works of the persons listed. He also cited what these people did to maintain pure teaching, while not failing to mention what was at work in opposition to pure teaching.³³ More important, however, is the fact that Major concluded his *Catalogus Doctorum* with Martin Luther.³⁴ As such, Major viewed Luther as the culmination of a list of teachers of the church, which includes Johannes Tauler, Jan Hus, Jean Gerson, Johann Geiler von Kaysersberg, and Wessel Gansfort. God had always been at work to restore the purity of doctrine, Major maintained, but his efforts did not come to fruition until the reformer of Wittenberg appeared.³⁵ Luther had already been dead for four years by the time Major's treatise was published, and therefore Major could include the reformer in the century-long line of succession of church fathers and scholars. Even though not stated explicitly, unity, universality, and catholicity

had become watchwords, attributes to which, according to Major, the Wittenberg reformers were even more entitled than Rome. This concept of succession also had an impact on the issue of whether the church fathers were capable of erring.

The Degree of the Fathers' Authority and Their Role for Major

There are two decisive factors that determined how Major evaluated the role of the church fathers. He cited both of these, in addition to other countless reasons, primarily to document the truth of God's Word,³⁶ although they can also be evaluated as prerequisites for the way he dealt with the fathers. One factor involved the *consensus* or *perpetuitas doctrinae* [perpetuity of doctrine].³⁷ This referred to the view that divine doctrine does not change regarding its content and its impact in the course of human history. As such, faith is focused on the same teaching, as it has been passed on as *una omnium vox* [a single voice of all]³⁸ from the beginning of time to today. The other factor was the *successio patrum* [succession of the fathers]. God uses the fathers—regardless of whether they were the patriarchs of the Old Testament, the apostles of the New Testament, or the fathers or scholars of the early church, the Middle Ages or the present time—to sustain his church and pure doctrine. “In the church of God there is a certain and continuous succession, from Adam down to the times of the teachers through whom this doctrine has been propagated.”³⁹ Thus, in addition to the *perpetuitas doctrinae*, the *successio patrum* was actually regarded as an acceptable entity. But while Major was convinced that true doctrine had been handed down to the Reformation era by means of the *successio doctrinae*, and, as such, enjoyed absolute authority in and of itself, statements of the fathers regarding interpretation of Holy Scripture had to be carefully scrutinized. For only the prophets and apostles received true doctrine directly from God. As such, their word is God's Word.

Thus, if the statements of the fathers coincide with the Word of the prophets and apostles, and if they are faithful to the *analogia fidei*, they should be granted authority.⁴⁰ Of course, this authority of the fathers applies only if they illuminate the truth of public teaching by being faithful to the statements of Scripture. It is not their own

theological achievements that make the fathers valuable witnesses, Major stated, but rather the way their texts illuminate Scripture. On this point, Major viewed himself in complete agreement with Augustine and Jerome.⁴¹ Although Major valued tradition and made use of it, this point does make clear, for instance, that he opposed giving it any priority over or equality to Scripture, as the Council of Trent had decreed. Thus, there was no way, he stated, that tradition should be the measuring stick for correctly understanding Holy Scripture, for this would mean that one would place the writings of the fathers and the decrees of the councils above the *doctrina coelestis*. Finally, the Holy Scripture springs from the Son and the Holy Spirit himself, while the prophets and apostles are their mouthpieces, so to speak.

Major listed two reasons why only secondary authority should be attributed to the fathers when compared to the prophets and apostles. One reason is their *vocatio*. The Fathers did not receive a direct *vocatio* from God, which the prophets and apostles did. Rather, the fathers' calling was mediated by human beings (*mediata per homines*).⁴² Another reason—and one that should also make very clear why one needs to acknowledge the possibility that the fathers, even the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament, apart from their composition of Scripture, were capable of erring—is that not all of them were imbued by the Holy Spirit with the same level of intelligence or the same ability to interpret correctly.⁴³ The most impressive examples given by Major in this regard are those of certain actions of Peter and Paul. This makes apparent how Major's firm conviction that Reformation doctrine is directly in line with the *successio doctrinae* is in itself a criterion for evaluating tradition. According to Major, Paul distinguished between law and gospel much better than Peter did. As Major states, "Great is the weakness even of the saints, and in other matters some have more and greater gifts from the Holy Spirit than others. The gifts of the Holy Spirit did not always stimulate each one in the same manner . . ." ⁴⁴ That knowledge that even the greatest saints of the past centuries had weaknesses, were capable of error, and were sinful, was essential for the Evangelical appropriation of tradition.⁴⁵

Based on this, one would expect Major to admit categorically that the fathers and councils are capable of erring—a topic that he himself treats in his treatise. Nevertheless, he maintained that their decisions were important, albeit with certain limitations. As he discussed 1 Timothy 3:15, a section declaring the church to be the pillar and foundation of truth (a point for which the Augsburg Interim had argued),⁴⁶ Major initially allowed the opinion that the church and councils are not capable of erring because they are led by the Holy Spirit. As such, the church and councils are, in fact, “pillars and the foundation of truth.” This was also true for previous centuries, albeit only insofar as the church held to the cornerstone of Christ, with the apostles, and the prophets as its foundation (Eph. 2:20). The key point is that church, councils, and the fathers had to have remained faithfully bound to the superior authority of the Word of God. As long as this guideline provided their orientation, they were immune against error. At the same time, this means that their authority was based on the Word of God. As such, the image of the church was not based on the *successio patrum* or the hierarchy of the offices, but on the legitimation of doctrine declared in accordance with Scripture and the *doctrina coelestis*.

For this reason, the truth of Scripture is the standard—not the rank of conciliar decisions or the majority of votes that established them.⁴⁷ As proof for this, Major did not refer to Scripture itself but specifically to the Fathers, namely Augustine, Cyprian, Chrysostom, Jean Gerson, and Panormitanus (Nicolaus de Tudeschis, 1386–1445), a late medieval archbishop and canon whom the reformers held in high esteem. All of these confirmed Major’s view.⁴⁸ In this context, Augustine is of great importance since Major’s opponents stressed the key importance of tradition by citing a phrase of Augustine’s, “I would not believe the gospel if the authority of the universal church did not move me.”⁴⁹ This quotation supported their claim that, in fact, tradition plays a key role for understanding the gospel.

For this very reason, Major was concerned to reinterpret Augustine. As a student of Melancthon, Major found the key for his reinterpretation in the term “church.” When Augustine speaks of the *ecclesia catholica*, then—Major claimed—he did not mean a church that derives its name solely from the *successio ordinaria*. Rather, the

true church is held together by the permanently efficacious Word of God and its proclamation, as handed down from the Son of God to the prophets and apostles, that is, through the *successio doctrinae*.⁵⁰ This means that the true church is an entity which builds on the Word of God as its foundation and—across the centuries—passes on the Word as true doctrine. As such, the church can also look back on the authority of the witnesses. When any doubts or controversies arise, the weight of the fathers can be added to the Word of God and/or the *doctrina coelestis* for interpretation and illumination. This is how Major also understands the rule of Irenaeus, which later was often quoted in light of the inter-Protestant controversies regarding the Lord's Supper and Christology: "For if there is any dispute about any minor question, is it not necessary to have recourse to the most ancient churches, in which the apostles were present and from them to seek an answer that is certain and clear?"⁵¹ Presuming that there is a clear ranking between the primary authority of the Word of God and the secondary authority of the fathers, tradition can definitely to be put to use by the Evangelicals.⁵²

When Did Major Use the Fathers?

It is noteworthy that Major very rarely quoted the church fathers in his treatise. Therefore, he made limited use of their content in his argumentation, and he did not quote a wide range of patristic sources, but rather limited himself to only a few names. Except for the Nicene Council, he cited absolutely no councils at all. When he did quote a certain passage written by a church father, he rarely mentioned the text from which it was taken. Sometimes Major just listed a name without citing any other contents or the context.

The main reason for this is that Major's treatise *De origine et auctoritate verbi Dei* was not addressing apologetically any particular controversy, so that there was no reason to bolster his positions with quotations from the fathers. When he wished, in other writings, to prove the truth of a certain doctrine over against the attacks of opponents from every quarter, Major warded off the allegations that the Evangelicals taught atrocious "*novum dogma*" by always generously quoting the fathers from throughout the centuries. In this

context, he did not *need* to do this. However, when he did refer to individual fathers on occasion, he did so in order to provide key foundations to buttress his argumentation. But Major's occasional references to tradition in *De origine et autoritate verbi Dei* served fundamentally the same purpose as his more frequent quotations of the fathers in controversies regarding confession of the faith and public teaching. Major was chiefly concerned to prove that he was not alone with his views, even if they sounded unfamiliar. He was not trying to innovate but could easily refer to a respectable and long line of worthy authorities. This becomes clear in the two steps of argumentation that he employed.

First, Major's Evangelical view of tradition, following the standards set by Luther and Melancthon,⁵³ regarded the fathers of the ancient church and the theologians of the Middle Ages as part of the long succession of historical authorities. The framework for this lies in the understanding of human history, as set forth by the Old Testament, in stages of one thousand years. For instance, Adam and Noah are listed as authorities in the *Catalogus Doctorum Ecclesiae Dei* on the same level with Augustine and Jerome. This is possible because Major postulated that the revelation of God through the Son began before time commenced. Even at the creation of the world, Christ spoke his Word of revelation, handing down the *doctrina coelestis*—identical to the revelation of God—to these specially gifted individuals. For this reason, the succession of tradition began at the creation of humankind, which is why—for Major—the term *patres* was not limited to the fathers of the early church. Rather, it also extended to those “pre-patriarchs” (*Urväter*). Major cited Irenaeus and Tertullian, who both pointed to the revealing work of the Son—even long before his incarnation⁵⁴—as witnesses for his position.

Second, what is more important for Major was the fact that he wanted to evaluate tradition in comparison to Holy Scripture in an appropriate and legitimate way. When the Augsburg Interim, contemporaneous with the Council of Trent, attempted to re-catholicize Evangelical territories,⁵⁵ the significance of the fathers and councils became a critically important issue. Major clearly placed the fathers and the councils in a subsidiary position to Holy Scripture. What they say and decide had to bow to the *doctrina coelestis*, as presented

in Holy Scripture. The *doctrina coelestis* is the measuring stick for the truthfulness of the statements of tradition, gaining importance when they focus on the true contents of Scripture as an *analogia fidei*. Basically, this served only as a correction of the positions made official at the Council of Trent and the Augsburg Interim, which is why it was especially significant to have the fathers on one's side.

Therefore, in his treatise Major used the fathers to argue *against* the fathers, with Augustine, Cyprian, Chrysostom, the Council of Nicaea, and even representatives of medieval erudition such as Gerson and Panormitanus, confirming his understanding of tradition as having only a *secondary* authority, under Holy Scripture. Put another way, the fathers attributed to themselves a secondary rank. Major demonstrated his theological skill in the way he quoted the fathers, demonstrating that it was actually quite traditional to use tradition in this way and not to give it equal footing along with Scripture, or, even worse, to place tradition *above* Scripture.

As such, the authority of Scripture, and thus of the church, depends on the Word of God being passed on correctly, namely, according to Major, this authority is derived from *doctrina*. As such, it is not the *successio ordinaria* or the *successio patrum* that are key, but rather the *successio doctrinae*—or to quote Major, the *perpetuitas doctrinae*. Against this background, he could without reservation affirm the position of Irenaeus, whom he quoted from *Adversus Haereses* in calling for the utilization of the decisions of the fathers, especially in disputes.⁵⁶ And, at the same time, Major indicated clearly which of these fathers could be used as indisputable witnesses for truth. As such, their writings had to be tested to see whether they corresponded to the Word of God as expressed in the *analogia fidei* or the *doctrina coelestis*. Because of their temporal proximity to Christ and the apostles, this list would, of course, include the apostolic fathers Polycarp and Ignatius as well as the great scholars of the first five centuries—Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine.⁵⁷ Thus, Major selected his witnesses for tradition from precisely this group of men. Only Gerson and Panormitanus are examples for the addition of other—even medieval—authorities, albeit only if one could assume from their statements doctrinal integrity in the reformational sense.

Summary

In retrospect, we can summarize how Georg Major deals with the Church Fathers in the following four theses:

1. Major detaches tradition from the institution of the church. Rather, he held that tradition is founded on the *doctrina coelestis* [heavenly doctrine], understood as a living teaching handed down from generation to generation.⁵⁸ In light of this understanding of tradition and the way orthodoxy is passed on, it is possible for the Evangelicals to make use of the fathers of the ancient church.

2. In the same way as did his mentor Melancthon, Major assumed that the fathers and councils did not create any "new dogmas." Rather, the fathers and the councils document how pure doctrine was handed down by prophets and apostles and how to understand them correctly. This in turn demonstrates how this doctrine should be handed down to future generations. As such, the fathers act as a bridge from the revelation of the church's doctrine from ancient times until Major's own time, making sure that a doctrinal vacuum does not develop, but rather that there is doctrinal continuity.⁵⁹ Especially in the second half of the sixteenth century, this was to be a key factor in the inter-Protestant disputes.

3. In light of this, Major reached the conclusion that the way the medieval Roman church had understood tradition should be seen only as a constricted, limited part of that tradition, representing a very narrow slice of world history. In contrast, the Evangelical understanding of tradition was in line with the wider view, which goes beyond post-apostolic times, even back to the Old Testament. As such, not only is the same doctrine revealed in both Testaments, but there is also a continuity of doctrine from the beginning of time, encompassing the fathers of the Old and New Testament, the post-apostolic period, and extending all the way to the church of the Reformation.

4. Therefore, the councils and the fathers can lead back to pure and true doctrine, although this is not their sole function. Not only do they act as a bridge to the original and thus true doctrine, but they are also able to cultivate faith and comfort consciences in times of dispute and *Anfechtung*.

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NOTES

1. *DE ORIGINE ET AUTORITATE uerbi DEI, & quae Pontificum, Patrum & Conciliorum sit autoritas, admonitio hoc tempore, quo de Concilio congregando agitur, ualde necessaria. ADDITVS EST CATALOGVS Doctorum Ecclesiae DEI,—mundi initio, usque ad haec tempora. AVTORE GEORGIO MAIORE. VVITEMBERGAE EX OFFicina Iohannis Luffi. ANNO M.D.L.*—This treatise was published in many editions and widely circulated, see *Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachbereich erschienenen Drucke des XVI. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in München and Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1988–), 1. Abt., Bd. 12 . Nr. M2120 – M2126.

2. As Luther had already stated at the Leipzig Disputation of 1519; see Bernhard Lohse, “Von Luther bis zum Konkordienbuch” in *Handbuch der Dogmen- und Theologiegeschichte, Bd 2: Die Lehrentwicklung im Rahmen der Konfessionalität*, ed. Carl Andresen (2. ed., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 25–27; *Die Leipziger Disputation von 1519. Ein theologische Streitgespräch und seine Bedeutung*, ed. Markus Hein and Armin Kohnle (Herbergen der Christenheit Sonderband 25; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019); *Luther at Leipzig. Martin Luther, the Leipzig Debate, and the Sixteenth-Century Reformation*, ed. Mickey Mattox, Richard J. Serina, Jr., and Jonathan Mumme (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

3. As quoted by Major: “Quamquam enim Christus ascendens in altum et sedens ad dexteram dei patris, uideatur deseruisse Ecclesiam sponsam suam et eam exposuisse furoribus diabolica et mundi, sicuti apparet Ecclesiam duriter quassari, . . . , tamen quia mittit spiritum sanctum, quia dat Apostolos, prophetas et singulis aetatibus excitat sanctos et pios Doctores . . . et quia mirabiliter tales Doctores et coetus piorum, contra Diaboli et impiorum Tyrannidem, defenduntur ac seruantur, ideo constat ac certum est. Ecclesiam non esse a Christo desertam, sed perpetuo eum, tanquam caput adesse duo corpori, pro eo excubare, id gubernare et defendere sicuti sonant per ipsum datae promissiones, Non relinquam uos orphanos, Ero uobiscum usque ad consumationem seculi . . .”: Major, *De origine et autoritate*, C7a. Major additionally cited Isaiah 51:16 and 59:21.

4. The importance of Major in the discussion of the authority of the tradition is first mentioned in Franz Lau, “Georg Major,” in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3. ed., 4 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1960), 617. Martin Chemnitz was probably the first to consolidate Melancthon’s teaching about doctrinal continuity in the term *traditio*. Major, on the other hand, used the verb *tradere*. See the reference on Chemnitz in Peter Fraenkel, “Revelation and Tradition. Notes on Some Aspects of Doctrinal Continuity in the Theology

of Philip Melancthon," *Studia Theologica* 13 (1959): 123. See also Martin Chemnitz in *De Traditionibus*, "Examen Concilii Tridentini," according to the Frankfurt Edition 1578, ed. Eduard Preuss (Berlin: Schlawitz, 1861), 69–99.

5. Major was the editor of Luther's Wittenberg Edition from 1551 until its completion in 1559. For this information and for Major in general, see Heinz Scheible, "Georg Major" in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 21 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991): 725–730.

6. See Major, *De origine et auctoritate*, p. G6b and endnote 17 below.

7. *Vitae Patrum in Vsum ministrorum verbi, quo ad eius fieri potuit repurgatae. . . . Cvm Praefatione D. Doctoris Martini Lutheri* (Wittenberg: Seitz, 1544). In the secondary literature some incorrectly speak of a "purified" edition, but in the *Vitae* themselves the content is hardly modified at all. On Major's edition of the *Vitae patrum*, see Scott Hendrix, "Deparentifying the Fathers: The Reformers and Patristic Authority," in *Auctoritas Patrum. Zur Rezeption der Kirchenväter im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert. Contributions on the Reception of the Church Fathers in the 15th and 16th Century*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Beiheft 37, ed. Leif Grane, Alfred Schindler, and Markus Wriedt (Mainz: von Zabern, 1993), 58, 60.

8. See *Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 57 vols., eds. J.F.K. Knaake et al. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883ff.) 54:109–111. (Hereafter cited as WA.)

9. This is the title cited by Peter Meinhold, *Geschichte der kirchlichen Historiographie*, Vol. 1 (Freiburg/München: Orbis Academicus III/5, 1967): 314. Johann Georg Walch cites Sebastian Schwan as the translator, dating his translation to 1604. Regarding the *Vitae Patrum* in general, see Meinhold, 314–322, and also James Michael Weiss, "Luther and His Colleagues on the Lives of the Saints," *The Harvard Library Bulletin* 33 (1985): 180–188.

10. See *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämmtliche Schriften, herausgegeben von Dr. Joh. Georg Walch* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1881–1910), 14: 402, footnote*.

11. At the time, this work was attributed to Jerome. Friedrich Schulz incorrectly assumes that Major referred to Jerome's *De viris illustribus* in *Patrologiae cursus completus: series Latina*, J.P. Migne, ed. (Paris & Turnhout: Garamond Frères, 1844–1864), 23:631. (Hereafter cited as PL.) See Schulz' article "Hagiographie IV," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 14 (Berlin: de Gruyter), 1985, 377; Rufinus' *Historia monachorum*, in PL 21, 387–464.

12. These "martyr books," which also had a pastoral-conciliatory function, aimed less at teaching justification, but mainly sought to encourage those being persecuted. For more on "martyr books," see Frieder Schulz, "Hagiographie IV," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 14 (1985): 377–379; Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at the Stake, Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Robert Kolb, *Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 85–102.

13. See Heinrich Denzinger, ed., *Kompendium der Glaubensbekenntnisse und kirchlichen Lehrentscheidungen*, ed. Peter Hünermann, 37. ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1991) §1501–1508; and also Hubert Jedin, *Geschichte des Konzils von Trient*, Vol. II: *Die erste Tagungsperiode 1545/47* (Freiburg: Herder, 1957), 42–82.

14. ". . . omnes libros tam Veteris quam Novi Testamenti . . . nec non traditiones ipsas . . . tamquam vel ortenus a Christo, vel a Spiritu Sancto dictatas et continua successione in Ecclesia catholica conservatas pari pietatis affectu ac reverentia," Denzinger, *Kompendium*, §1501.

15. "Ut nemo . . . sacram Scripturam ad suos sensus contorquens, contra eum sensum, quem tenuit et tenet sancta mater ecclesia . . . aut etiam contra unanimum consensum Patrum ipsam Scripturam sacram interpretari audit . . .," Denzinger, *Kompendium*, §1507.

16. Major, *De origine et auctoritate*, F7b, G1a and G4b.

17. Major, *De origine et auctoritate*, G6b,

18. See Major, *De origine et auctoritate*, G6b–7a: “Vocamus autem Catholicum consensum eam sententiam scripturae, quae ab Apostolis Ecclesijs tradita est primum, quam Ecclesiae et ipsorum Ministri, Apostolorum discipuli et ordine alij, synceram et incorruptam, consentientem cum ipsis Prophetarum et Apostolorum scriptis retinuerunt.”

19. This term is based on Rom 12:6. See Major, *De origine et auctoritate*, C5a, and Karl-Heinz Menke, “Analogia fidei,” in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*. 3. ed. 1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1993): 574–577.

20. Major, *De origine et auctoritate*, C4b: “Postremo nullam interpretationem scripturae recipiendam esse, quae cum scriptis Apostolorum et Prophetarum non consentiat, quae non sit Analoga [sic] fidei. Sicuti enim autor, ita et interpres suae doctrinae solus est spiritus sanctus. Non ualeat contra hoc uerbum ullius hominis auctoritas, sanctitas, et dignitas. Cedant hic Patres, Pontifices, Episcopi, Concilia, principes, reges, caesares, imo angeli ipsi, Quia mandatum et uerbum dei praefendum est omnibus creaturis.”

21. *Das Augsburger Interim von 1548. Nach den Reichstagsakten dt. u. lat.*, ed. Joachim Mehlhausen (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970²), 64–65.

22. See *Augsburger Interim*, Art. X: 66, 67: “The fourth sign of the true church is whatever is catholic and universal, which is distributed across all places and different ages, continued by the apostles and their successors by succession down to us, and is propagated to the ends of the earth . . .”

23. See *Augsburger Interim*, Art. XI: 66, 67.

24. See *Augsburger Interim*, Art. XI: 66, 67, from which comes this quote.

25. From a foreword by Thomas Cranmer, the archbishop of Canterbury, we know that Major himself regarded his treatise to be a part of the post-Interim developments. In this foreword, Cranmer referred to England as a place of refuge for people forced into exile because of their teaching. See Major, *De origine et auctoritate*, A6b–7a.

26. For Major, *doctrina* means the living process of teaching as well as the contents of the teaching. For this reason, when Fraenkel speaks of Melancthon’s use of the term *doctrina*, he speaks of a “verbal noun.” See Fraenkel, “Revelation and Tradition,” 116–118.

27. See Major, *De origine et auctoritate*, A2b.

28. See Major, *De origine et auctoritate*, C6b–7a.

29. Major, *De origine et auctoritate*, D3b. “Prodest autem ad confirmandam fidem plurimum, saepe considerare seriem Doctorum in Ecclesia dei, inde ab initio rerum, usque ad haec tempora.” The *catalogus* is found on D3b–F5b. Bernhard of Clairvaux shows that such compilations always containing the same biblical authorities were common property and could also be included in various kinds of statements. See Bernhard of Clairvaux, “De consideratione ad Eugenium papam,” Book 2, VIII.15., in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed: G.B. Winkler, 1 (Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1990): 686–687.

30. See Melancthon, *Loci communes* 1559, “De discrimine Veteris et Novi Testamenti,” in: *Corpus Reformatorum. Philippi Melanthonis Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. C. G. Bretschneider and H. E. Bindweil (Halle and Braunschweig: Schwetschke, 1834–1860), 21:802. (Hereafter cited as CR.) See also Luther, “Supputatio annorum mundi,” 1541. 1545, in WA 52:1–184. Luther counts six millennia and does not regard them as different series of doctors of the church. See also Luther, Tischreden Nrs. 5298 and 5300, in WA TR 5:50f. Regarding Melancthon’s way of dealing with tradition, see Peter Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum. The Function of the Patristic Argument in the Theology of Philip Melancthon* (Travaux d’Humanisme et Renaissance 46, Geneva: Droz, 1961), “Revelation and Tradition,” 97–133.

Regarding Luther's way of dealing with tradition, see John M. Headly, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1963).

31. In this way, Major expanded a long tradition begun by Melancthon. See Melancthon's preface to Luther's Works, *Tomus primus omnium operum Reverendi Domini Martini Lutheri* . . . (Wittenberg: Hans Lufft, 1545), in CR 5:691-693. See Major, *De origine et autoritate*, E5a-5b. In fact, the fifth order claimed by him contains only the rubrics *I. Apostoli*, *II. Apostolorum Discipuli* und *III. Episcopi*, see E5b-F5b. This should probably be seen as an obvious reaction to Art. XI of the Augsburg Interim, in which they speak of a handing down *per manus episcoporum*. See *Augsburger Interim*, 68, 69.

32. See Luther, "Commentary on Galatians," 1535, in WA 40I:106. Regarding Melancthon on Gregory, see Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum*, 96-100.

33. For instance, see the short article on Bernhard of Clairvaux in Major, *De origine et autoritate*, F5a. For more detail, see also Luther, "Commentary on Galatians," 1535, in WA 40I:687, as well as Luther's letter to Melancthon dated August 4, 1539, in WA Br 5:525-527, Nr. 1674.

34. For this, too, Melancthon had set the stage. See above in endnote 30 as well as Melancthon's funeral oration at Luther's burial in CR 11:272-278. See also Kolb, *For All the Saints*, 105-107.

35. The succession of tradition from Tauler via Gerson to Luther could be deduced from Luther's positive statements regarding Gerson as the *Doctor consolatorius*. For this insight I am indebted to Christoph P. Burger. See his "Aedificatio, Fructus, Utilitas: Johann Gerson als Professor der Theologie und Kanzler der Universität Paris," *Beiträge zur Historischen Theologie* 70 (1986): 1-6.

36. See Major, *De origine et autoritate*, B4a-C2b. Arguments such as these are common usage in the sixteenth century. With the exception of Luther, the friends and students of Melancthon generally accepted a pattern compiled by their Wittenberg professor, which they then varied. See Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum*, 244.

37. Major, *De origine et autoritate*, B5b-6a.

38. Major, *De origine et autoritate*, B5b.

39. Major, *De origine et autoritate*, C2a: "In Ecclesia Dei certa et continua series ab Adam in haec usque tempora Doctorum est, per quos haec doctrina est propagata."

40. See Major, *De origine et autoritate*, C4b; see endnote 19 above.

41. See Major, *De origine et autoritate*, C5a-5b.

42. See Major, *De origine et autoritate*, C4b-5a: "Magna igitur insania, imo summa impietas quorundam est, qui celesti doctrinae, cuius autor filius dei et spiritus sanctus est, partum scripta, Pontificum et conciliorum decreta, uel aequant uel preferunt. Nam Prophetarum et Apostolorum uocatio immediate à deo ipso est, et ut supra ex Petro ostensum est, ipsorum doctrina non est humana uoluntate allata, sed spiritu sancto impulse, locuti sunt dei homine. Quare certi sumus hos non posse errare. Episcoporum uero uocatio mediate est per homines, illi non sint magistri aut auctores scripturae seu articulorum fidei, sed sint et maneat Prophetarum et Apostolorum discipuli et accipient doctrinam per Prophetas et Apostolos traditam, ac illam proponent Ecclesiae, illam explicare et illustrare studeant." Originally, Major had ascribed secondary authority to the fathers and theologians of the Middle Ages regarding the definition and historical lineage of true doctrine. Later, however, when writing *Corpora doctrinae*, the authors of these documents were less inclined to ascribe this secondary authority to outstanding individuals—not even to

Martin Luther. Rather, they ascribed it solely to confessions of the faith. Regarding the two kinds of *vocatio*, see Fraenkel, *Testimonia patrum*, 159.

43. See Major, *De origine et autoritate*, F8a–G1a. Major dedicates an additional section to the question of the *donum interpretationis* (gift of interpretation). See *De origine et autoritate*, G4b–8b.

44. Regarding Peter and Paul, see Gal. 2:11–21. Major, *De origine et autoritate*, F8a.

45. “Deinde de haec Sanctorum errata et peccata proposita sunt, ut Ecclesia habeat consolationem, ut cum illis sua peccata sint condonata, credamus et nobis remitti, iuxta articulum, Credo remissionem peccatorum, qua fide, tota Ecclesia cum omnibus sanctis, opus habet, et quotidie orare cogitur, Dimitte nobis debita nostra. Non igitur audiendi sunt, qui fingunt, Sanctos non posse errare aut peccare, Vere enim de omnibus hominibus in hac uita dicitur, Nihil tam proprium est homini, quam labi, decipi ac falli. In altera uita uero non erit errores aut peccato locus,” Major, *De origine et autoritate*, G1a.

46. See note 24 above.

47. See Major, *De origine et autoritate*, G1a—3a, esp. G2b/3a: “Quare autoritas Ecclesiae, Conciliorum et Patrum, non ex ordinaria successione, non ex titulis, non ex Ministerio, non ex multitudinis iudicio, aut pluralitate suffragiorum, sed ex solo Deo uerbo pendet, contra quod si quid statuitur, totum erroneum et impium est.”

48. See Major, *De origine et autoritate*, G1a—3a. Regarding Panormitanus, see H.F. Jacobsen and Emil Sehling, “Art. Panormitanus,” in *Realencyklopädie für Protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, 3. ed., 14 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1904): 626.

49. See Augustine, “Contra epistolam Manichaei” V.6, in PL 42: 176: “Euangelio non crederem, nisi me Ecclesiae catholicae moueret autoritas.”

50. See Melancthon, “De ecclesia et autoritate uerbi Dei,” in CR 23: 598 and “Loci communes 1559,” in CR 21: 833–835.

51. See Major, *De origine et autoritate*, G3b. See Irenaeus, “Adversus Haereses,” Lib. III, cap. IV, in: *Patrologiae cursus completus: series Graece*, 161 vols. ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: Petit-Montroye, 1857–1866), 7: 855 “Quid enim et si qua de aliqua modica quaestione disceptatio esset, nonne oporteret in antiquissimas recurrere Ecclesias, in quibus Apostoli conuersati sunt, et ab eis de praesenti quaestione sumere, quod certum et re liquidum est?” For Major, this rule of Irenaeus replaced the rule of Tertullian (always used by Melancthon and his Wittenberg colleagues), that the true doctrine is always the oldest doctrine. See Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum*, 187–191 with footnote 75.

52. See Major, *De origine et autoritate*, G4b: “Deinde etiam recurrendum est ad antiquissimas Ecclesias, ut Irenaeus monet. Sunt autem antiquissimae Ecclesiae, quae ab ipsis Apostolis sunt fundatae.” Even Luther states that the fathers are a stage for getting back to Scripture if they are understood as they themselves wanted to be understood, namely, not as independent authorities but as authorities tied to Scripture. See Luther, “Von den Konziliis und Kirchen,” in WA 50:519.32–520.10 and 524.25–525.30.

53. See endnote 29.

54. “Et ideo ueteres dixerunt, Filium dei Verbum dici, quod cum Patribus locutus sit. Sic Tertullianus, in lib. Contra Iudeos cap. 1. Scribit, Dixit autem Iesus ad Cain, Vbi est Abel frater tuus? Et Irenaeus aduersus haereses cap. 14. Ab initio abistens Filius suo plasmati, reuelat omnibus Patrem, quib. uult, et quando uult, et quemadmodum uult Pater etc.,” Major, *De origine et autoritate*, D4a, quoting Irenaeus even before the dedication, A3a. See Tertullian, “Adversus Iudeos,” cap. 5, in: PL 2: 607, albeit where it reads, “And then God

said to Cain" (author's emphasis) and Irenaeus, "Adversus Haereses," lib. IV, cap. XIX, in: PG 7: 1010–1012. This quotation used by Major is not repeated word for word in the modern editions.

55. See Major, *De origine et autoritate*, A5a. In this passage, Major expresses this opinion very clearly: "Quia uero hoc tempore de Concilio cogendo, edidi hanc breuem et simplicem commonefactionem, de autoritate uerbi Dei . . ."

56. See above, endnote 47.

57. See Major, *De origine et autoritate*, G7b. As a "pre-Reformation reformer," so to speak, Augustine always played a key role in Wittenberg thinking. Regarding Luther and Augustine, see Wolfgang A. Bienert, "Im Zweifel näher bei Augustin?" Zum patristischen Hintergrund der Theologie Luthers," in *Oecumenica et Patristica. FS für Wilhelm Schneemelcher*, ed. Damaskinos Papandreou et al. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1989), 281–294; Wolfgang A. Bienert, "The Patristic Background of Luther's Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 9 (1995): 263–280. Melanchthon regarded Augustine as one of the best representatives of biblical theology. See Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum*, 191–201. The series of patristic authorities does not coincide with the one stated by Melanchthon in the prologue to volume 1 of the Wittenberg Luther Edition of 1545 (see above, footnote 31) or with the series on the fathers in *De ecclesia et autoritate uerbi Dei*, where Melanchthon again posits a *catalogus* of synods and fathers. See: CR 23: 595–642, especially 605. However, this is a later edition of 1560 and not one of the earlier writings that have been printed over and over since 1539.

58. The foundation for this concept was laid by Luther. See Headley, *Luther's View of Church History*, 100–102.

59. See Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum*, 181.