

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 19

Volume 19 • Number 2 • April 1995

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission p. 98

ISSN: 0144-8153
Vol. 19 No. 2 April-June 1995

Copyright © 1994 World Evangelical Fellowship

Editor

Bruce J. Nicholls

Associate Editor

John Roxborough

Book Reviews Editor

David Parker

Editorial Assistant

Kathleen Nicholls

Committee

(The Executive Committee of the WEF Theological Commission):

Peter Kuzmič (Chairman), Bong Rin Ro (Secretary),
Pedro Arana, Wilson Chow, Rene Daidanso Ma Djongwe,
Ward Gasque, Emmanuel Gbonigi, Rolf Hille

Editorial Policy

The articles in the *Evangelical Review of Theology* reflect the opinions of the authors and reviewers and do not necessarily represent those of the Editor or Publisher.

Manuscripts, reports and communications

should be addressed to the Editor and sent to
73 Kohimarama Road, Auckland 1005, New Zealand

The Editors welcome recommendations of original or published articles or book reviews that relate to forthcoming issues for inclusion in the Review. Please send clear copies of details to the above address.

Reviews of books

should be sent to Dr. David Parker
17 Disraeli Street, Indooroopilly, Queensland 4068, Australia

Subscriptions

For the British Isles and Commonwealth (1995) £19.80.
For the USA: \$59.00.

For the Developing Countries (nationals and institutions):
50% discount on the rates shown above.
Long-term rates on application to the publishers. p. 99

Editorial

The WEF Theological Commission Study Unit on Ecumenical Issues under the convenorship of Dr. Paul Schrottenboer is to be congratulated for producing this significant work on Scripture and Tradition. The project was commissioned by the Theological Commission's General Assembly in Manila 1992. The Study Unit commissioned eight scholars to write chapters and they were reviewed by a smaller editorial team. They will welcome readers' responses to their work.

Evangelical responses to the relationship of tradition and scripture vary considerably from one ecclesiastical family to another. In a world of theological flux and confusion it is imperative that evangelicals begin to address this issue which hitherto has received little attention. We are a fragmented household holding fast to the plurality of our own traditions which all too often shape our biblical hermeneutics at the levels of both the local church and the global community. For some time evangelical groups have been in dialogue with the Roman Catholic church on this issue and more recently dialogue has begun with the Eastern Orthodox Churches, especially since the WEF Assembly at Canberra 1992 where evangelicals and orthodox felt common concerns. Therefore, this special issue of ERT deserves careful study and evaluation. Perhaps Paul's admonition to 'Be on your guard. Stand firm in the faith ... do everything in love' ([1 Cor. 16:13f](#)) points the way forward. p. 100

I

The Old Testament as Tradition

Harry F. van Rooy

INTRODUCTION

For evangelicals the term tradition has negative connotations. Part of our Reformation heritage is a negative view of the Roman Catholic emphasis on ecclesiastical tradition. This view can, for example, be seen in Calvin's *Institutes* (4.10.18): 'For this reason we freely inveigh against the tyranny of human traditions which is haughtily obtruded upon us in the name of the Church.' The negative connotations are a result also of the emphasis on the history of tradition in modern critical study of the Old Testament because of its rejection of the inspiration of the Bible. This negative view needs reevaluation. The Old

Testament is built on many traditions. God even commanded his people to instruct the next generations—and this instruction entailed handling traditions down to posterity. An example of this command can be found in [Deuteronomy 6:6–7](#) (GNB): ‘Never forget these commandments that I am giving you today. Teach them to your children. Repeat them when you are away, when you are resting and when you are working’. [Deuteronomy 31](#) stipulates that the law must be read publicly every seventh year and that everybody—men, women, children and foreigners—must be present to listen to the law in order to learn how to honour the Lord. These references demonstrate that tradition played a role in Old Testament times. It also played a role in the formation of the Old Testament. In this paper tradition and its function in the Old Testament will be discussed, followed by a discussion of two representative examples (from Hosea and Chronicles) and concluding remarks.

TRADITION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

All cultures have traditions that express their self-understanding, sense of the past, system of beliefs and codes of conduct. The history of traditions (*Traditionsgeschichte*) as practised in Old Testament studies investigates the nature of the traditions in the Old Testament, as well as the way in which they were used and modified during the course of Israel’s history. Tradition in this [P. 101](#) Lutheran and Reformed is evidence of this.

There are other reasons too for such a study. There is some evidence that evangelicals from non liturgical churches are joining more tradition conscious churches, especially those with strong liturgical worship patterns. This suggests a growing fascination with tradition. Furthermore, the traditional forms of worship which were exported by western missionaries during the modern missionary era are still being adhered to by many churches in the two-thirds world. What is significant is that often the traditional nature of these forms is not recognized. They are regarded as having a divine mandate rather than as being human constructs. (Ironically, in some cases, such tradition is no longer the norm in the ‘mother’ church but the ‘daughter’ church considers the forms sacrosanct. For example, there are congregations in India that use the 1662 Anglican liturgy for the Holy Communion, whereas that liturgy is rarely used in England today.) Moreover, most of these churches can ill afford the division that such adherence to tradition produces in their context.

On the other hand, tradition is being challenged by those who would like to redefine the Christian faith in ways that are considered more acceptable to modern society and to adherents of other religions. In several denominations voices calling for a fresh assessment of the value of creedal and confessional statements that have been long regarded as normative are becoming louder and more strident. These confessions, rooted and formed in tradition, have provided their respective churches with the doctrinal standards that have helped preserve the faith; but today they are regarded increasingly as fossils that are historically interesting but irrelevant.

From the above, it is apparent that there is a need to review the relationship between Scripture and tradition. It is also necessary to assess the role Tradition has played in preserving and/or changing the faith of the Church.

The outline of this study is simple. It begins with a study of the OT as tradition and then proceeds to an evaluation of the NT as tradition. Then follow essays on tradition in the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Historic Reformation Churches. An essay on the impact of the Enlightenment on views of tradition is followed by one on tradition in the Ecumenical movement. The concluding essay is an attempt to formulate an evangelical

view of the relationship between Scripture and tradition. In the Epilogue questions are posed for further discussion.

Dr. Harry F. van Rooy is Professor of Old Testament Studies at the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, South Africa. p. 102

Introduction

Paul G. Schrottenboer

The Bible is part of the Christian tradition and at the same time the Bible stands in a unique role in the whole history of tradition. The Bible tells a history of salvation which became a tradition, which in turn took on normative form in the canonical writings. Tradition both preceded and follows Scripture. Prior to the biblical writings were the mighty acts of God, the revelation of God's way with creation and its inhabitants, and the oral transmission, the story of these redemptive acts and revealing words. Following the tradition contained in the canonical books came the tradition of the church. Behind church tradition are the life and work of the church through the ages. Tradition is in the making still today.

Much has been made in ecumenical circles of tradition. It is widely recognized to be one of the most important topics on which there should be more agreement, though, in fact, it is itself the source of disagreements. This appears from the different views among the various confessional communions and ecclesial organizations. However it is clear from the ecumenical discussion that there is a close relationship between tradition and Scripture.

Among evangelicals there appears to be no generally accepted view of tradition. Some, as in the Anglican communion and in the Reformed Churches, would take the view that the post-apostolic tradition provides normative church standards. Others would draw a straight line between the NT church and the church today, thus bypassing history.

So, then, how are Scripture and tradition related? Are they both part of a continuum in which the one flows into the other? Or is there a qualitative discontinuity between the one and the other? The subject of this study is the precise relationship between the Bible and tradition.

The plan to engage in such a study was formed at the meeting of the WEF Theological Commission in Manila in June, 1992. There it was recognized that this is a largely unexplored field among evangelicals. Although evangelicals are often not aware of it, tradition does affect them and the very variety of evangelical traditions such as Baptist, Pentecostal, p. 103 sense refers simply to that which is handed over and can be either oral or written.

An important distinction should be made between *traditio* and *traditum*. *Traditio* is the process of handing material down. *Traditum* refers to the traditional material that is handed down. The process is changeable, with a more rigid and faithful transmission on one occasion and with intentional or unintentional changes, additions or deletions on another occasion. In the process of handing down, different forces may be at work. Interpretation and actualization are examples of such forces. Traditions often receive new

actualizations in new circumstances and this requires reinterpretation of old traditions. This can cause agglomeration and fusion, causing traditions to grow with the passing of time. The *traditum* gave expression to the faith community life. The content of traditions increased during the course of time and sometimes changed in meaning.

Tradition can thus simply refer to that which somebody received from someone else and handed down to somebody else at a later stage. This process proceeds from generation to generation. Such a tradition has content and form and is the property of a specific community. It has a direct function for the people who transmit it. A tradition is therefore living, developing, malleable, and only relatively stable. Tradition tends to be cumulative and agglomerative.

When Israel started to collect and preserve material of lasting importance, the memories of history were embodied in her traditions. She understood herself on the basis of her knowledge of events such as the promise to the patriarchs, the exodus, the salvation at the Red Sea, the covenant at Sinai, the wilderness, the occupation of the land, the covenant with David and the building of the temple. These traditions were frequently reformulated in new contexts.

One such widespread tradition was the deliverance from Egypt. This tradition occurs in the narratives, psalms and in the works of the prophets. It is used in diverse ways. Hosea pictures God's judgements as a return to Egypt, while Deutero-Isaiah sees the return from the exile as a new exodus.

In the times of the Old Testament the different units of tradition originally existed separately. Later on they were linked in larger blocks of tradition, such as the exodus, the patriarchs, and the wilderness. The study of traditions is important for reconstructing the early history of Israel. Three important issues must be taken into consideration thus in reconstructing history, viz., the intent, the locus and the thematic sequence. The intent of the traditions was not to present historical information, but to recount sacral-oral origins. It was meant for instruction and celebration. The locus of the traditions testifies to a united intertribal Israel. The thematic sequence of the traditions had as starting-point the exodus and conquest of the land. This was expanded with the result that the final form of the tradition represents the growth of the traditions and does not constitute a direct representation of events as reported by eyewitnesses. The oral tradition was written down at some point in time. In some [p. 104](#) instances the oral stage was longer and in others—such as the prophetic material—probably shorter.

The history of traditions looks at the forces and influences behind the formation of the Old Testament. Four important issues must be taken into consideration, the group that shaped and transmitted the tradition, the location, the social, political and religious dynamics, and the themes and motifs.

It is, however, important to remember that the Old Testament is not just the end result of the formation of tradition. It is also the written record of the proclamation of God's acts. In the history of Israel tradition was sometimes the springboard for error and sometimes for revelation. In the times of Jeremiah, for instance, a false use of the traditions regarding Zion resulted in the people being caught unawares by the catastrophe of the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem, while Jeremiah pronounced the judgement of God on the people by referring to the Sinai tradition. The biblical authors were not enslaved by their traditions. There are, however, clear indications in the Old Testament of how people struggled with God and their traditions and they reinterpreted the traditions for their own time. In the next two sections two examples of the use of traditions in the Old Testament will be discussed.

HOSEA'S USE OF OLD TRADITIONS¹

It is well-known that the history of his people played an important part in the preaching of Hosea. Hosea's preaching was firmly rooted in salvation history and he felt safe only when building his arguments on history. No other prophet from the Eighth Century referred more to history than Hosea. Some scholars regard it as probable that Hosea's knowledge of the traditions came from Levitical circles and that the traditions were thus typical northern traditions and others think that the traditions were rather Deuteronomic. The origins of these traditions are not really important for the purposes of this article. It is clear that extensive use is made of traditions in the preaching of Hosea. The following historical traditions are important:

- The promise to the patriarchs: [1:10](#); [9:10-12](#).
- The sojourn in the desert: [2:14](#); [9:10-12](#); [12:9](#); [13:4-5](#).
- The election in the desert: [9:10-17](#); [10:1-2](#); [11-13a](#); [13:4-8](#); [2:16-17](#); [12:10](#).
- The exodus from Egypt: [2:15](#); [8:13](#); [9:3](#); [6](#); [11:1](#); [11:5](#); [12:9](#); [12:13](#); [13:4](#).
- A covenant tradition; in [2:20](#); [6:7](#); [8:1](#); [10:4](#); [12:2](#) in the context of [2:18-25](#); [6:7-11a](#); [8:1-3](#); [10:34](#); [12:1-2](#).
- Baal Peor: [9:10-17](#).
- The destruction of Admah and Zeboiim: [11:8](#).
- Jacob's birth: [12:3](#).
- Jacob's struggle with a divine being: [12:3-4](#).
- Jacob's experience at Bethel: [12:3-4](#).
- Jacob's flight to Aram: [12:12](#).
- Jacob's servitude in Aram: [12:12](#).
- Jacob's striving for divine blessing: [12:4](#). p. 105
- The leadership of the prophet (Moses): [12:13](#).
- The election: [1:9](#); [11:1-7](#); [13:5-8](#).
- The Valley of Agor: in connection with the conquest of the promised land. [2:15](#).
- A Decalogue tradition: [Hosea 12:9](#); [13:4](#); [8:4-6](#); [13:1-3](#); [4:1-3](#).

Hosea's use of tradition may be divided into three groups. The first group consists of a number of traditions related to the exodus from Egypt, the sojourn in the desert and the conquest of the promised land. The second group contains traditions related to Jacob. In the third group other traditions are related to the Pentateuch.

EXODUS, DESERT AND CONQUEST

The exodus from Egypt

The exodus from Egypt is for Hosea the start of Israel's relationship with God. In [12:9](#) and [13:4](#) the prophet refers to the exodus and the salvation thus brought about by God. By references to Ephraim in the immediate context the contemporary Ephraim and the people of the exodus are linked.

[Hosea 8:13](#) refers to a return to Egypt in an oracle of doom. [8:11](#) refers to Ephraim and verses [11-13](#) form a unit. Verse [11](#) refers to Ephraim, with the implication that it is Ephraim who would return to Egypt, again linking the contemporary Ephraim to the people of the exodus. In [Hosea 9:3](#) it is explicitly stated that Ephraim would return to Egypt (cf. also [9:6](#)). In [Hosea 11:1](#) and [5](#) reference is made to Egypt. In verse [1](#) the election

¹ The following section is largely based on Van Rooy (1993).

of Israel is mentioned as well as the exodus. Verse [2](#) treats the sin of the contemporary people and in verse [3](#) God's care for his people is explained. Verse [5](#) again refers to a return to Egypt. [12:13](#) states that God delivered Israel from Egypt through a prophet, while [12:14](#) uses the name Ephraim when describing the sin of the contemporary people. Hosea regards the exodus from Egypt as the birth of the nation—and a return to Egypt means death for Ephraim. The exodus tradition shows God's grace in history on the one hand and God's judgement on the other in speaking of a return to Egypt.

Traditions related to the sojourn in the desert

The sojourn in the desert is linked to the name Israel in [9:10](#). In the next verse Ephraim is again used for the contemporary people. The time in the desert is often regarded as the time when there was a sincere relationship between the Lord and his people.

The metaphor of Israel as a grapevine full of grapes in [10:1–2](#) can also refer to the sojourn in the desert. The same is true of [10:11–13a](#). Verse [11](#) is the only passage in the Old Testament where Jacob and Ephraim are used in a parallelism. It is possible that Hosea is describing the history of the people in this passage and that he is referring to a time when there were good relations between God and the people. If this is true, it refers to the time in the desert. It is perhaps more probable that this section should be linked to the Jacob traditions. Ephraim and Judah are then names of tribes that became names of states, while Jacob refers to the old tribal league. The [p. 106](#) references to altars and the productivity of the land make this idea more attractive. It is also possible that Jacob does not refer to the old tribal league, but to the United Monarchy, when Judah and Ephraim still formed one nation (Jacob).

The election tradition in [1:9](#), [11:1–7](#) and [13:5–8](#) is also related to the exodus traditions and the sojourn in the desert. Here the traditions are a negative reflection on the people of the time of the prophet.

A covenant tradition

Clear traces of a covenant tradition in Hosea appear in [2:18](#), [6:7](#), [8:1](#), [10:4](#) and [12:1](#) in the context of [2:18–25](#), [6:7–11a](#), [8:1–3](#), [10:3–4](#) and [12:1–2](#). The word *berith* can be regarded as authentic in these texts. [Hosea 2:18](#) deals with a covenant that God made with the animals for the benefit of the people, [Hosea 6:7](#) and [8:1](#) indict the people because they broke their relationship with God and [10:4](#) and [12:1](#) regard Israel's treaties with other nations as a turning away from the Lord.

[Hosea 2:18](#) is part of a section that refers to other important traditions (the exodus and the sojourn in the desert, [2:10–11](#)). This supports the idea of a covenant tradition in the book of Hosea.

A Decalogue tradition

A number of passages contain traces of a Decalogue tradition, viz., [Hosea 12:9](#), [13:4](#), [8:4–6](#), [13:1–3](#) and [4:1–3](#). Hosea probably knew the Decalogue in a pre-final form. In [12:10](#) and [13:4](#) an introductory formula appears: 'I am the Lord your God, who led you out of Egypt.' This formula corresponds with the introduction of the Decalogue. In [12:9](#) this Decalogue tradition is connected with the traditions regarding the exodus and the time in the desert.

[Hosea 8:4–6](#) and [13:1–3](#) refer to the prohibition of making idols in the second commandment. These passages are directed against the practices of Hosea's day but may also refer to the traditions regarding the gold bull in [Exodus 32](#).

JACOB

In [Hosea 12](#) a number of traditions pertain to Jacob. As they all occur in the same chapter, the chapter as a whole will be discussed rather than in separate traditions. Here we read of Jacob's birth, his struggle with a divine being, his experience at Bethel, his flight to Aram, his servitude in Aram and his request for a blessing.

Here an important issue is the origin of these traditions and their relation to the traditions in Genesis. It is also a matter of dispute whether the traditions give a positive or a negative view of the patriarch.

The name Jacob occurs twice in this chapter and refers initially to the Northern Kingdom, but it is also used to make a connection with the past. The name is used with a double reference in verse [3](#). It refers to the contemporary people in the first instance, but the focus is shifted to the patriarch and in the next two verses a number of traditions relating to the patriarch are recounted, viz., those regarding his birth ([3](#)), his struggle with a divine being ([3-4](#); cf. [Genesis 32](#)), his experience at Bethel ([4](#)) and his asking for divine blessing ([4](#)). A whole complex of [p. 107](#) traditions concerning the patriarchs is linked to the name Jacob. The name Israel also has a double message in this passage, referring to both the patriarch and the people of the time of the prophet.

OTHER PENTATEUCHAL TRADITIONS

The promise to the patriarchs

This tradition occurs in [Hosea 1:10](#) and [9:10-17](#). [Hosea 1:10](#) refers to the number of the children of Israel who will become like the sand of the sea that can not be counted or measured. This can be compared to the promises to Abraham ([Genesis 22:17](#)) and Jacob ([Genesis 32:12](#)MT). The words of [1:10](#) are close to those of [Genesis 32:12](#), the promise to Jacob. In the promises reference is usually made to the descendants of the patriarchs.

[Hosea 9:10-17](#) has references to three of the traditions, viz., the promise to the patriarchs, the sojourn in the desert and the election and the tradition regarding Baal Peor. It is also related to the election in the desert and the Baal Peor tradition, that is related to the fertility cult. In this passage the Israel of the time in the desert, who sinned at Baal Peor, is compared to the contemporary Ephraim. The sin of the people during the time of the conquest was reflected in the service of Baal by the Israelites, who were supposed to serve the Lord. As regards the promise to the fathers, verses [11-14](#) refer to the infertility of Ephraim and verses [15](#) and [17](#) to the loss of the land. These references are thematically related to the promises to the patriarchs, but are here used not in blessings but in curses. They are, therefore, rather examples of discontinuity.

The destruction of Admah and Zeboiim

[11:8](#) refers to the destruction of Admah and Zeboiim (together with Sodom and Gomorrah in the time of Lot). The parallel in [Deuteronomy 29:23](#) (MT) is of importance, because that reference also appears within a context of judgement.

It is quite clear that Hosea uses the traditions of his people extensively. The Genesis traditions related to Jacob are used, for example, to demonstrate how Jacob cheated his brother. This depicts the Northern Kingdom as a land of economic greed and plunder.

CHRONICLES' USE OF TRADITIONS REGARDING PROPHETS²

² The following section is largely based on Van Rooy (1994).

Chronicles frequently refers to prophets. Even a cursory comparison of texts dealing with prophets in Chronicles and Samuel-Kings demonstrates differences within the data regarding the same prophets. Chronicles clearly reflects on the function of prophets and prophecy in a changing society. One has to presuppose that the changing position and influence of the prophetic movement after the exile are reflected in these books. Chronicles uses older traditions than Samuel and Kings but frequently reinterprets or adapts the information to fit into the chronicler's scheme. **P. 108**

In the Deuteronomic History and in Chronicles attempts are made to describe the history of Israel—but these descriptions remain interpretations within a certain frame of reference. Each description and interpretation was directed at a certain community with a specific message. The point of view from which this description was made is related to this message and reflects something of the circumstances in which the text was created. This text pictures, rather, recreates the history of a nation to bring a message in a new time. We have two versions of the history of this nation. By comparing them, the message of each in its own point in time becomes clearer. The reinterpretation in Chronicles remains linked to the context of that time, even though we are looking through the eyes of tradents and their developed tradition. The writer(s) of Chronicles had many traditions at their disposal, especially the written traditions of Samuel-Kings. It is quite probable that the text they used differed from the Massoretic text, but they had a text with a number of traditions about prophets. They used those traditions, often in a new framework, to bring a new message in a new time.

This section will focus further on what can be deduced from the text about the role of prophets during the time when the books were written, especially in comparison with Samuel-Kings. Chronicles reflects a time when classical prophecy changed into a related but different phenomenon. Chronicles reflects one of at least two positions, viz. the theocratic stream, while the visionary or eschatological stream is reflected in deuteroprophetic literature. The way in which prophets appear in these books will be illustrated by discussing only a few representative examples.

REGAL RESUMÉS

At the beginning and end of the description of the time of a king so-called regal resumés frequently appear in Chronicles. In the final resumés reference is often made to further sources. Of the fifteen final instances in Chronicles, eight have references to works (words) of prophets ([1 Chron. 29:29](#); [2 Chron. 9:29](#); [12:15](#); [13:27](#); [20:34](#); [26:22](#); [32:32](#); [33:18–19](#)). In the other instances reference is made to the book of the Kings of Israel (and Judah).

Two examples will suffice for these references to prophets. The description of the reign of King David is concluded in [1 Chron. 29:29–30](#). 'Now the acts of King David, first and last, indeed, they are written in the book of Samuel the seer, in the book of Nathan the prophet, and in the book of Gad the seer, with all his reign and his might, and the events that happened to him, to Israel, and to all the kingdoms of the land' (NKJ). The conclusion to the reign of Jehoshaphat is as follows ([2 Chron. 20:34](#)): 'Now the rest of the acts of Jehoshaphat, first and last, indeed they *are* written in the book of Jehu the son of Hanani, which is mentioned in the books of the kings of Israel' (NKJ).

The following prophets are mentioned in this way in Chronicles: Samuel, Nathan, Gad, Ahija, Iddo, Shemaiah, Jehu, Isaiah and Hozai.

For the purpose of this paper it is **p. 109** more important to ask what the purpose of these references to prophetic sources could be. The text offers no reason, but it is quite

clear that the writer(s) wanted to place himself (themselves) squarely within the prophetic tradition.

PROPHETS IN CHRONICLES WITH PARALLELS IN THE DEUTERONOMIC HISTORY

There are a number of instances where prophets occur in Chronicles with parallels in the Deuteronomistic History. An example is in [1 Chron. 17](#), which can be compared to [2 Sam. 7](#), regarding the prophet Nathan and David's desire to build a temple. There are only a few minor differences between the two texts, e.g., the omission of 2 Sam. 7.14, with its reference to the possible judgement of Solomon, one of the Chronicle's heroes. These minor changes in the tradition testify to the theological position of the writer(s). In some instances the context of an episode in the two texts may differ, even though the data may correspond quite closely. This can be seen in [1 Chron. 21](#). Its parallel in [2 Sam. 24](#) forms part of the appendix to 2 Samuel, while the story forms part of the main narrative in Chronicles.

PROPHETS IN CHRONICLES WITHOUT PARALLEL IN THE DEUTERONOMIC HISTORY

In some instances Chronicles introduces new material. In some of these instances there is some link with material in the Deuteronomistic History and in others no link at all.

Examples of instances in Chronicles with no link at all include some general references to prophets, for example in verse [22](#) of the Psalm in [1 Chron. 16](#) (with a parallel in [Psalm 105:15](#)), Jehoshaphat's exhortation to the people to believe in God and his prophets ([1 Chron. 20:20](#)), the reference in [2 Chron. 24:19](#) that God sent prophets to warn the people in the time of Joash and the reference in [2 Chron. 36:16](#) that the people mocked the prophets.

There are also some instances where the chronicler refers to prophets known from the Deuteronomistic History, but introduces new material about them. The letter of Elijah could be an example of this. In some of the instances reference is made only to a person known from the Deuteronomistic History. In 1 Chronicles reference is made to Heman, who is called the king's seer. His sons were among the musicians appointed by David. A person with the same name is mentioned in [1 Kgs. 5:11](#) as a wise man. It is not clear whether the same person is meant, but what is important is the link between Levitical musicians and a seer. In [1 Chron. 26:28](#) reference is made to the seer Samuel who dedicated things that were given in the care of Levites. Again a link is made between a seer and the Levites. These 'new' traditions introduced in Chronicles form part of the chronicler's attempt to link the contemporary Levites with the authentic voices of the prophets of history.

There are also instances where Chronicles gives an expansion of material from Kings and introduces a prophet in the process. This is perhaps the case in [2 Chron. 15:1-8](#) and the prophet Azariah, the son of Oded. The episode may be related [p. 110](#) to [1 Kgs. 15:12](#), where reforms of Asa are mentioned. In Chronicles the prophet Azariah is introduced and his words were instrumental in causing the reform. Another example could be in [2 Chron. 16:7-10](#) with its reference to the seer Hanani. He may be the father of Jehu, mentioned in 1 Kgs. 16.1. The cause of his words is Asa's treaty with Ben-Hadad. A parallel can be found in [1 Kgs. 15:17-22](#). In the prophecy Hanani preaches against this treaty. In [1 Kgs. 15:23](#) reference is made to Asa's illness. [2 Chron. 16:12](#) adds that he did not seek the Lord in his illness. The prophecy of Hanani may be an addition to give the cause of the illness. The chronicler often uses speeches like this one to state his own theological convictions.

The findings on the prophetic material with no parallels in Kings can be summarized in five points:

- They comment on and supply interpretations of events described in Kings, linking events to the king's relation to the Lord;
- Their words are primarily directed at the king;
- Their message goes back to a theological view that trust in God results in blessing and mistrust brings judgement;
- Two groups can be distinguished, viz. prophets also known from Kings and prophets introduced in Chronicles; and
- Three of them had to suffer on account of their message.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Four general tendencies in the Chronicler's treatment of prophets can be distinguished: 1. He goes much further than the Deuteronomistic History in emphasizing the prophetic dimension in Israel's history and introduces new material; 2. prophetic speeches are more closely related to the prophetic books; 3. the chronicler's prophets have more resemblances to the classical prophets of the prophetic books than to the deuteronomistic prophets; and 4. he uses prophets to fill gaps in the Deuteronomistic succession of prophets.

The many references to prophetic works in the regal resums are an attempt by the prophet who is writing to connect his work with the prophetic tradition. Prophets are transformed into historians in Chronicles. The writer of Chronicles must have had some link with the cult. In the words of the classical prophets in their books, the cult is often attacked. This aspect of the prophets' word does not function in Chronicles. This can be due to the writer's attempt to demonstrate continuity between the prophets of history and his own tradition, which is more related to priestly circles. This necessitated an adaptation of the prophetic traditions.

Prophets in Chronicles are often linked to the progress of the theocracy. They played an important role in the founding of the monarchy. They admonished kings and pronounced blessing or judgement, depending on the king's reaction. They were the guardians of the theocracy—and the rejection of their words resulted in judgement, as can be deduced from the reference in [2 Chron. 36:16](#) that the people mocked the prophets. The actions of the prophets were often linked to [p. 111](#) the chronicler's doctrine of retribution. Disobedience resulted in judgement and obedience in blessing. In this regard the rejection of treaties with foreign nations played an important role.

[2 Chron. 25](#) illustrates two aspects of the way prophets are introduced in these books. This chapter describes the history of Amaziah, with the parallel passage in [2 Kgs. 14](#). In Kings no prophets are mentioned; in Chronicles two prophets are introduced. In this way Amaziah gets his prophetic counterparts. In the first instance, in verses [7–9](#), a man of God instructed the king not to use Israelite mercenaries against Edom. He obeyed the unknown man of God, with positive results. In verses [15–16](#) the actions of another unknown prophet are described. After his return from his victory over Edom, Amaziah bowed down before the gods of the people of Self. This prophet came to rebuke the king. The king refused to listen. The result was that judgement was pronounced on him. In the following passage the defeat of Amaziah in a battle against Israel is ascribed to his sin and disobedience. Positive and negative retribution is explained through the introduction of two unknown prophets in this chapter. In the theocracy the prophets had the task of proclaiming God's words to the kings of Judah, and they received blessing or judgement in accordance with their reaction to these words. The fate of people and king often depended on their response to the prophetic word.

In Chronicles the prophets emphasized the true cult, almost on a par with the actions of kings. Part of the prophetic message is that Judah's prosperity is related to her fidelity to the cult. This can be contrasted to the many negative remarks of the classical prophets about the cult. The prophets are responsible for the reconstruction of the temple.

It remains a valid question whether the changes regarding the prophets in Chronicles against the Deuteronomic History did not lessen their role. When a prophet becomes institutionalized, something of his message is lost. Prophets are often used in Chronicles to legitimize institutions of the writer's time. It is possible that this treatment of prophets, with only short-term predictions, must be seen as a reaction against the rise of the apocalyptic with its focus on the future and its use of unclear figures of speech.

In the Persian period the role of the prophets became smaller and prophecy was transformed into apocalyptic. If it is accepted that the apocalyptic and the Levites were opposing parties, the way prophets are pictured in Chronicles can be regarded as part of an ideological struggle. In history as recreated in Chronicles, kings, prophets and Levites played the major parts—and only the Levites remained in the new society and a changing world. They are the legitimate successors of the leaders of the pre-exile community. The temple was to serve as the focal point of a new community and prophets are used in Chronicles to emphasize this role accorded to the temple.

The coupling of Levites with the prophets and the kings of the people's history also served to emphasize the more important role to be played by [p. 112](#) the Levitical hierarchy. Only they remained of the leading pre-exilic institutions. On account of their historical ties with prophets and kings, the Levites were fit to lead the people into a new future.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is clear that tradition played an important role in the history of Israel and in the formation of the Old Testament. The traditions God commanded his people to hand down from generation to generation were mainly related to God's acts on behalf of his people. As the Old Testament evolved during the course of many centuries traditions were often handed down orally for generations before they were written down. In this way the Old Testament reflects an expanding process of revelation through which God unfolded his plan with his creation, and especially with his people.

The Old Testament speaks thus about a history of salvation that as a whole itself became a tradition. This tradition was written down, expanded, reinterpreted and remained God's Word for his people during this process. The Old Testament is however more than just a record of traditions. It is God's Word that is normative for his children. All presentday ecclesiastical traditions must be tested against this normative Word.

Biblical traditions are both historical and revelational. They relate both to the redemptive acts of God in the history of salvation and to the prophetic word that accompanies and explains these redemptive acts. Today normative biblical tradition must continually be interpreted and be applied to new life situations. In this way the ancient traditions of the Old Testament will always speak anew in a world lost in sin.

What now can be deduced further from the Old Testament's use of traditions? People today, like those of every human society have their own traditions. They came into existence in various ways, they developed in various ways. We should not reject our traditions—but we may also not be bound by our traditions. In this regard the Old Testament's use of its traditions may help us.

One thing is sure, the modern evangelical should never regard traditions as fixed and unchangeable nor yet ignore them. Without traditions we lose our roots, but traditions

must not hamper necessary development and growth in our faith and in our churches. As in the Old Testament old traditions were used to bring a new measure in a new time so we need to evaluate our own traditions to determine what can be used—in a new framework if necessary—to give us new direction.

We must exercise our liberty in Christ by using traditions creatively to meet the demands of our time. In this way traditions can be used to instruct people living in a new time with new demands.

There is no need for a negative view of traditions as such. Just as the biblical writers exercised great liberty in dealing with their traditions, fitting them into new frameworks, rephrasing them to answer the demands of new circumstances, teaching new lessons by using old traditions, so we should exercise liberty as people enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

To do this we must use our traditions [p. 113](#) selectively, not just cling to an old way of doing things, retaining what is relevant for our situation and discarding what is irrelevant. We must not discard the essentials of our faith to make the message of the gospel acceptable to man, but we must reject old forms that no longer serve a purpose as vehicles to transmit God's normative Word.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ackroyd, P. R., 'Hosea and Jacob'. *Vetus Testamentum* 13: 245–259. 1963.
- Ackroyd, P. R., *I & II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah* (London: Torch Bible Paperbacks, SCM, 1923).
- Anderson, G. W., *Tradition and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1929).
- Blenkinsopp, J., *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (London: SPCK, 1984).
- Block, D. I., Israel's house: reflections on the use of *byt ysr'l* in the Old Testament in the light of its ancient Near Eastern background. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28: 257–275 (1985).
- Breytenbach, A. P. B., '[Hosea 12:1–14](#)'. *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 41:197–207 (1985).
- Breytenbach, A. P. B., 'Pentateugtradisies in die boek Hosea'. *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 48:645–662 (1992).
- Calvin, J., (trans. Henry Beveridge) *Institute of the Christian Religion*. Two volumes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966).
- Carroll, R. P., *When prophecy failed. Reactions and responses to failure in Old Testament prophetic traditions* (London: SCM, 1929).
- Carroll, R. P., 'Prophecy and Society'. (In *The world of Ancient Israel. Sociological, anthropological and political perspectives*, ed. R. E. Clements (Cambridge: University Press, 1989, pp. 203–225).
- Coote, R. B., 'Hosea XII'. *Vetus Testamentum* 21:389–409 (1921).
- Daniels, D. R., *Hosea and salvation history*. (Berlin: De Gruyter. (BZAW 191), 1990).
- De Vries, S. J., *1 and 2 Chronicles. (The forms of the Old Testament literature.)* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989).
- Emmerson, G. I., *Hosea. An Israelite prophet in Judean perspective*. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, (JSOTSS 28) 1984).
- Fohrer, G., Tradition und Interpretation im Alten Testament. *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 73: 1–30 (1961).
- Fohrer, G., *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1986).
- Goldingay, J., *Approaches to Old Testament interpretation* (Updated edition) (Leicester: Apollos, 1990).
- Good, E. M., 'Hosea and the Jacob tradition'. *Vetus Testamentum* 16: 137–151, 1966.

- Gottwald, N. K., *The Hebrew Bible—a socio-literary introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).
- Hayes, J. H. & Holladay, C. R., *Biblical Exegesis. A Beginner's Handbook. Second Edition* (London: SCM, 1988).
- Holladay, W. L., 'Chiasmus, the key to Hosea XII: 3–6', *Vetus Testamentum* 16: 53–64, 1966.
- Jacob, E., 'Der Prophet Hosea und die Geschichte', *Evangelische Theologie* 24: 281–290, 1964.
- Kaiser, W. C., 'Inner biblical exegesis as a model for bridging the "then" and "now" gap: [Hos. 12:1–6](#)', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28: 33–46, 1985.
- Knight, D. A., *Rediscovering the traditions of Israel. The development of the Tradition-Historical research in the Old Testament, with special consideration of Scandinavian contributions*, Revised edition (SBLDS 9) (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975).
- Köckert, M., 'Prophetie und Geschichte im Hoseabuch', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 85: 3–30, 1988.
- McKenzie, S. L., 'The Jacob tradition in [p. 114 Hosea 12:4–5](#)', *Vetus Testamentum* 36: 11–322, 1986.
- McKim, D. K., ed., *The authoritative Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).
- Michael, Rosemarie, *Die Seher- und Prophetenüberlieferungen in der Chronik*. (Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese und Theologie 18.) (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1983).
- Neef, H.-D., 'Gottes Treue und Israels Untreue. Aufbau und Einheit von Jeremia 2, 2–13', *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 99: 37–58, 1987a.
- Neef, H.-D., 'Die Heilstraditionen Israels in der Verkündigung des Propheten Hosea. (Berlin: De Gruyter, (BZAW 169) 1987b).
- Petersen, D. L., *Late Israelite prophecy: studies in Deuteroprophetic literature and in Chronicles*. (Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 23) (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1977).
- Popper, K. R., *The open society and its enemies II. The high tide of prophecy: Hegel, Marx and the aftermath*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962).
- Rast, W.E., *Tradition history and the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).
- Van der Woude, A. S. 'Three classical prophets' (In Coggins, C., Phillips, A. & Knibb, M. eds., *Israel's prophetic traditions. Essays in honour of Peter R. Ackroyde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1982, p. 32–57).
- Van Rooy, H. F., 'The names Israel, Ephraim and Jacob in the book of Hosea', *Old Testament Essays* 6: 135–149, 1993.
- Van Rooy, H. F., 'Prophet and society in the Persian period according to Chronicles.' (In Eskenazi, T.C. & Richards, K. H. eds., *Second Temple Studies 2. Temple and community in the Persian period. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement* 175 (Sheffield, U.K.: JSOT Press, 1994, p. 163–179).
- Vollmer, J., *Geschichtliche Rückblicke und Motive in der Prophetie des Amos, Hosea und Jesaja* (Berlin: De Gruyter, (BZAW 119, 1921).
- Von Rad, G., *Old Testament Theology 1. The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions* (London: SCM, 1925).
- Wolff, H. W., *Dodekapropheton 1. Hosea*. Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag (BKAT XIV/1, 1961).
- Yee, G. A., *Composition and tradition in the book of Hosea. A redactional critical investigation*. Atlanta (Scholars Press, (SBL Dissertation Series 102, 1987).
- Zimmerli, W., 'Prophetic proclamation and reinterpretation' (In Knight, D.A., ed., *Tradition and theology in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977, p. 69–100).

Zobel, H. J., 'Prophet in Israel und Juda: das Prophetenverständnis des Hosea und Amos', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 82: 281–299, 1985.

Paul G. Schrotenboer is Executive Secretary of the International Association for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education USA. He was formerly General Secretary for the Reformed Ecumenical Synod. [p. 115](#)

II

The New Testament as Tradition

Brian Wintle

Tradition especially as it relates to Scripture has been a thorny issue in some segments of the Protestant Church ever since the Reformation. The difference of opinion is in a sense historical. The further away the church moved from the Roman Catholic Church, the lower the place that was apparently given to tradition. Or, to put it differently, the stronger the emphasis on *sola scriptura* the less the value officially given to ecclesiastical tradition.

It is true, nevertheless, that all segments of the church either deliberately or unwittingly do give value to tradition. It has been well stated that even the segments of the church that officially give no credence to tradition are in their very doing so honouring their respective traditions.

The subject of this paper is the New Testament as tradition. However, the primary focus of the paper will be on a prior issue—that is, the place given to tradition in the New Testament writings. In other words, it is necessary to determine how tradition is viewed and understood in the New Testament writings before we can understand in what sense it is valid to refer to these writings themselves as tradition.

We could begin with the general statement that although Jesus appears in the synoptics to have been quite harsh in his criticism of and opposition to Pharisaic tradition in particular, we find that there is an overall positive evaluation of tradition in the apostolic and sub-apostolic church. Now, if this statement can be substantiated, it reflects a situation that needs explaining; after all, the apostolic church was ostensibly built on Jesus Christ as its foundation. So how do we explain this?

I

JESUS AND TRADITION

In the synoptic gospels, Jesus appears to be in conflict with the religious leaders—the scribes and the Pharisees—over three aspects of the Jewish law: the sabbath, ritualistic purity, the issue related to the Corban vow and divorce. So we shall begin by considering what was the issue in these controversy narratives. Besides this, we will need to examine the significance of the antitheses in [Mt. 5:21–48](#) when Jesus apparently [P. 116](#) set his teaching in antithesis to rabbinic teaching.

The sabbath controversies

There are several pericopae in both the synoptics and the fourth gospel where Jesus was criticized for certain actions of his own—primarily healing the sick—or actions of his disciples on the sabbath—plucking ears of grain as they walked through the fields—that were considered by the religious authorities as being forbidden. There is some uncertainty regarding the precise nature of the objection when Jesus healed on the sabbath (e.g. [Mk. 3:1–6](#)). On some occasions, Jesus apparently defended his action on the basis of tradition itself.¹ For example, both the schools of Hillel and Shammai apparently agreed that rescuing an animal that had fallen into a ditch did not violate the sanctity of the sabbath. In [Mk. 3:4](#), Jesus silences his critics by contending on the basis of this very tradition that healing cannot be considered in any way an inappropriate action for the sabbath.² In similar vein, in [Ln. 7:23](#) Jesus defends healing on the sabbath on the basis of the tradition that allowed a child to be circumcised on the sabbath (cf. Bruce, 1970, 25).³

In [Mk. 2:23–28](#) we have another incident which gives us an insight into Jesus' attitude to Jewish tradition. Unfortunately, here too there is a lack of consensus among scholars regarding the point that Jesus makes in defending the action of his disciples. According to some scholars, like Bruce (1970, 25f.), Jesus' primary appeal is to the divine intention of the sabbath institution. He cites the incident when David and his men were not censured for eating the 'bread of the Presence' in the sanctuary—which, according to sacred law, was reserved for the priests alone—to establish the principle that the satisfaction of normal human need must take priority over the rulings of various rabbinical schools. R. H. Gundry makes a somewhat different point. 'Jesus did not describe the sabbath as less important than human benefit,' he says, 'but as meant for it—hence, he and his disciples broke the sabbath to fulfil its purpose. The argumentative appeal to the 'unlawful' action of David shows that Jesus recognized his disciples' action as breaking the Sabbath,' (1993, 365).⁴ This understanding of the incident, however, is strongly contested by other scholars. 'It must be stressed that in all three accounts there is no intention to [p.117](#) justify the disciples by means of an Old Testament precedent' says R. Banks (1975, 115). What is at issue is Jesus' authority—his authority latent in the permission he grants to his disciples to act on the sabbath or in his corresponding exegesis and teaching to that effect.⁵ Banks insists that 'the comparison is not between the conduct of David and his

¹ Cf. W. D. Davies, 1962, 96: 'In his treatment of the sabbath and divorce, Jesus always criticizes the law from within the law.'

² See too Cranfield, 1972, 119f. Some scholars differ in their understanding of the point at issue. For example, R. Banks (1975, 115) contends that the position Jesus adopts is that he will not abide by any tradition that hinders him from fulfilling his mission, an intrinsic part of which is his healing ministry.

³ See too Moule, 1966, 66.

⁴ Cf. Cranfield: 'The drift of the argument is that the fact that scripture does not condemn David for his action shows that the rigidity with which the Pharisees interpreted the ritual law was not in accordance with scripture, and so was not a proper understanding of the Law itself' (1972, 115). See too Pinnock, 1984, 38: 'Healing on the Sabbath and letting his disciples pick a few ears of corn to eat on that holy day did not constitute breaking the Sabbath for Jesus. He was more concerned to be loving than to be seen as strictly adhering to the letter of it (the law).'

⁵ Cf. P. M. Casey, 1988, 7: 'Jesus did not share the concern of the Pharisees and others to defend Judaism by means of the expansion of regulations. Thus he observed the sabbath but he vigorously defended his right to heal on that day, and he was not shocked that people who were hungry or in need should pluck corn in order to have enough to eat on that day; rather with prophetic authority he defended their right to satisfy their most basic needs on the day which God created for them to rest and to enjoy.' However, W. D. Davies, 1962, 96 interpreting the title 'Son of man' in [Mk. 2:28](#) as a corporate entity—that is, the messianic community—understands this incident differently. 'Even when he (Jesus) or his disciples do break the law,

followers on the one hand, and Jesus and his disciples on the other, but between Jesus and David themselves' (1975, 115). Interestingly, this understanding of the incident is supported further by the Matthaean account, according to which Jesus makes a further point: if it was traditionally accepted that the work of the priests in the Temple could not be brought under the ban on work on the sabbath, much more did his actions as 'one who is greater than the temple' surpass traditional rulings on the sabbath.⁶

In other words, there is no scholarly consensus that in the above incidents Jesus is actually rejecting Pharisaic tradition.

Ritual purity

What about, then, the incident recorded in [Mk. 7:1-23](#)? This is actually the only passage in the gospels in which there are explicit references to tradition as such. On this occasion the Pharisees and scribes criticized Jesus because his disciples did not ceremonially wash their hands before eating. 'Why don't your disciples live according to the "tradition of the elders"?' they asked in indignation. In response, Jesus denounced them as hypocrites who 'had let go of the commands of God and (were) holding on to the traditions of men' (v. [8](#)). James Dunn pinpoints the issue: '“The tradition of the elders” encouraged the worshipper to remain at the level of the merely outward, the superficial, and so encouraged hypocrisy' (1977, 63). This, then, appears to be a much clearer example of Jesus' rejection of Pharisaic tradition.

Jesus went on further to speak sarcastically of the fine way the Pharisees had 'of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe (their) own traditions' (v. [9](#)). The particular interpretation that he criticizes here was one which enabled a person to avoid the duty of maintaining his parents if he could claim that the money which he [p. 118](#) might have used for that purpose was already 'devoted to God' (*qorban*).⁷ 'Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down', says Jesus (v. [13](#)). Clearly, this 'tradition of the elders' which had been handed down and was valued so highly by the religious authorities is rejected here by Jesus as the work of men on the grounds that such tradition, instead of explaining scripture, actually set it aside.⁸ It is important to note that neither of the points that Jesus makes on this occasion necessarily implies that he rejected tradition *per se*. What he rejected was tradition which started as a way of interpreting the law but which had become 'in practice more important than the law'.⁹

this is justified (as) ... in the interests of the emerging messianic community or Jesus reacts to certain situations in immediate response to the will of God, thereby recognizing the supreme claims of that will without considering the effect of his action on the law.' See too J. D. G. Dunn, 1984, 407: '... the principle encapsulated here was ... about the liberty of the new age of God's favour: in the new age brought in by Jesus, faith and piety are not bound to or dependent on such rulings (as that of the Pharisees)'.

⁶ See R. H. Gundry, 1982, 224f.; Bruce, 1970, 25.

⁷ See Bruce, 1970, 24 for some interesting details regarding this tradition.

⁸ Cf. Cranfield, 'It is true that the scribes could point to an absolute command concerning vows inside scripture itself but it was their interpretation, their tradition, which was at fault; for it clung to the letter of the particular passage in such a way as to miss the meaning of scripture as a whole' (1972, 258). See too Cullmann, 1956, 63; Dunn, 1977, 63; R. H. Gundry, 1982, 224f.; Bruce, 1970, 25.

⁹ Dunn, 1977, 63. Cf. W. Lane, 1974, 252: 'Jesus categorically rejects the practice of using one biblical commandment to negate another. The Law ... is an expression of God's covenant faithfulness as well as of his righteousness and in no circumstances was obedience to one commandment intended to nullify another. The fault lay not in the commandment but in an interpretative tradition which failed to see Scripture in its wholeness.' Cf. also I. W. Batdorf, 1962, 685.

The law of divorce

When we turn to the law of divorce, the situation is comparable to the above. It was assumed in rabbinic interpretation, on the basis of [Deut. 24:1](#), that a man was entitled to divorce his wife if he found ‘something indecent about her’. The only point of discussion was what precisely constituted ‘something indecent’. But when Jesus was asked for his opinion on this ([Mk. 10:1–12](#)), he went back beyond the Deuteronomic legislation to the original ordinance in which man and woman were made for each other, being joined together by God. Therefore, he contended, divorce was not originally envisaged, but was actually a later provision made because of the hardness of men’s hearts.¹⁰ ‘An ethic which is truly to reflect God’s will must be built ... on basic principles’.¹¹ And such a concession to human sinfulness [p. 119](#) could hardly be treated as a divine principle.¹²

So in the case of the law of divorce, too, we find that Jesus rejected tradition only to the extent to which the divine was not properly understood. It was imperative that it be understood that divorce, even on the grounds of marital unfaithfulness, was a departure from God’s intention, and at best had to be accepted as ‘the lesser evil’. Jesus rejected what Jewish legalism had done—emphasized the concession rather than the divine intention.¹³

The antitheses of Mt. 5:21–48

We turn finally in this section to the so-called ‘antitheses’ passage in [Matthew 5:21–48](#) where Jesus apparently sets his teaching very deliberately in antithesis to what the Law had been understood to mean. The antitheses are not strictly uniform: in some cases Jesus’ teaching is contrasted with a traditional summary of or even inference from the Old Testament law, in others with a literal Old Testament quotation. However, we can give general agreement to Gundry’s assessment of these antitheses: ‘In all of them Matthew has shown that Jesus carried out the tendencies of the OT law to their true ends: OT prohibitions of murder and adultery escalate to prohibitions of anger and lust; OT limitations on divorce and oaths escalate to demands for marital compassion and simple

¹⁰ According to W. Lane, 1974, 355, the point being made is that ‘in [Deut. 24:1](#) divorce is tolerated, but not authorized or sanctioned’. Gundry, 1993, 538 disputes this on the grounds that in Mark, although the Pharisees speak about Moses ‘permitting’ divorce, Jesus speaks of ‘this commandment’ (RSV). Interestingly, in the Matthaean account ([19:1–12](#)) the situation is the other way round. It is Jesus who speaks about Moses ‘permitting’ divorce, whereas the Pharisees use the term ‘command’. It is probably unwise, then, to attempt establishing a case either way on the basis of the terminology used. But it remains true that the most natural reading of [Deut. 24:1](#) seems to be that divorce is a concession or provision that was made to deal with ground realities.

¹¹ France, 1985, 281. ‘Jesus’ appeal to first principles has the effect of apparently setting one passage of Scripture against another, but this is not in the sense of repudiating one in favour of the other, but of insisting that each is given its proper function, the one as a statement of the ideal will of God, the other as a (regrettable but necessary) provision for those occasions when human sinfulness has failed to maintain the ideal.’

¹² Cranfield’s comments are helpful: ‘A distinction has to be made between that which sets forth the absolute will of God, and those provisions which take account of men’s actual sinfulness and are designed to limit and control its consequences. (Such) provisions which God’s mercy has designed ... must not be interpreted as divine approval for sinning’ (1972, 319f.). See too Hill, 1981, 280f.

¹³ The force of Jesus’ argument is such that most commentators think the exceptive clause in [Matt. 19:9](#) is secondary and reflects a later modification of Jesus’ ruling, in effect reintroducing the Deuteronomic loophole. So, e.g. Bruce, 1970, 27. On the other hand, it may be argued that the ‘exceptive clause’ does no more than make explicit what is assumed in Mark—namely, that marital unfaithfulness—and this alone—automatically annuls a marriage by the creation of a new sexual union. But proper divorce—that is, the breaking of a marriage which is still intact, is absolutely forbidden. See France, 1985, 281f.; Hill, 1981, 281.

truthfulness; and the guard against revenge and commands to love neighbours and hate enemies in the OT escalate to the requirements of meekness and love even for enemies.’¹⁴

We may summarize our findings thus: there is insufficient evidence in the gospel material to support the view that Jesus rejected Jewish tradition outright. In fact, on more than one occasion he appealed to that very tradition to defend his actions or that of his disciples. It would be much more accurate to say that, in his controversies with the religious authorities, the primary point at issue was whether the traditional understanding or interpretation of the Law facilitated the fulfilment of the divine will or actually hindered such fulfilment.

II THE TRADITIONS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

There is widespread scholarly agreement that the traditions of the early P. 120 church divide conveniently into three categories: 1) a summary of the Christian preaching—the kerygmatic tradition; 2) various works and words of Jesus—the traditions about Jesus; and 3) ethical and practical instruction—the ethical tradition.¹⁵

The kerygmatic tradition

In [1 Corinthians 15](#) Paul, in referring in v. [3](#) to the summary of his evangelistic preaching in Corinth, speaks of having ‘passed on; (*paradidomi*) what he had himself ‘received’ (*paralambano*). Now these verbs were regularly used by the rabbis to refer to their oral tradition and it is almost certain that we are to understand that in the early church, the kerygmatic tradition was transmitted in a manner analogous to that by which rabbinic tradition was. The content of this kerygmatic tradition, referred to in [1 Cor. 15:3ff](#), consisted of a summary interpretation of Jesus’ death and then included a list of resurrection appearances. So an obvious inference is that the tradition was regarded as authoritative because it went back to apostolic eyewitnesses. There is, however, a further point of significance. It is most unlikely that the tradition which Paul had thus received included his own experience of the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. If that is so, however, the clear implication of the inclusion of this event in v. [8](#) in the list of resurrection appearances is that Paul, in passing on the tradition which he had received, modified it by adding his own encounter with the exalted Lord to the list. Here then is an important difference between the rabbinic understanding and the Pauline—and, presumably, the early Christian—approach to tradition: the rabbis regarded it of fundamental importance that the received tradition be passed on unchanged; for the apostle Paul, however, this was not so. The tradition for him was a living tradition—that could be added to as in this case.¹⁶ His authority for doing so was presumably related to his having been called to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul uses the same terminology in referring to the Christian preaching as the subject-matter of tradition elsewhere in his letters. For example, in [2 Thess. 2:15](#), [3:6](#) he exhorts the Thessalonians to ‘stand firm and hold to the traditions (fn.)’ that he had passed on to them and ‘to keep away from every brother who ... does not Five according to the

¹⁴ 1982, 100. For the significance of the form in which the antitheses are couched see D. Daube, 1956, 55–62.

¹⁵ Cf. R. P. C. Hanson, 1962, 10ff.; Bruce, 1970, 29; Dunn, 1977, 66–69; Cullmann, 1956, 64; G. E. Ladd, 1970, 228.

¹⁶ See K. Wegenast, 1978, 774 for some helpful comments on this; also Gundry, 1987, 161–178.

tradition' they had received from him. Similarly, in [Phil. 4:9](#) he exhorts his readers to put into practice 'whatever you have learned or received or heard from me'. In [1 Cor. 15:2](#) he speaks of the Corinthians 'holding firm to the word I preached to you' and in [Rom. 6:17](#) he refers to his readers having wholeheartedly obeyed 'the form of teaching' to which they had been committed—presumably at their conversion and baptism. Admittedly the reference in some of these texts is primarily to the ethical tradition which we shall consider later. All these references, however, [p. 121](#) strongly suggest that the process of formulating Christian truth began at a very early stage rather than towards the end of the New Testament period as is supposed by various scholars.¹⁷

In some of his letters Paul refers to a plurality of gospels, some of which he apparently accepts as valid, even though they differed from 'his gospel'. For example, in [Gal. 2:7](#) alongside the gospel that he preached, which he describes as 'the gospel to the Gentiles' he sets Peter's 'gospel to the Jews'. Paul evidently considered this a valid form of the kerygma, meant for the Jews. On the other hand he vehemently objects to the 'different gospel' that was being preached by some of his Jewish Christian opponents—for example in Galatia ([Gal. 1:6–9](#)) and in Corinth ([2 Cor. 11:4](#)). The interesting point to note here is that although Paul rejected these persons and their message, the very language that he uses in refuting them suggests that not everybody in the early church rejected them. For example, he denounces some of these persons as 'false brothers' in [Gal. 2:4](#), and in [2 Cor. 10:13](#) he refers to his opponents in Corinth as 'false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ'. Whatever the relative merits of the claims of Paul's opponents and his counter-claims, one thing is clear: these were professing Christians who had the courage to challenge Paul's apostolic authority precisely because they enjoyed the support of at least some of the leaders in the Jerusalem church. In other words, the evidence suggests that there was a diversity of formulations of the kerygma in the New Testament church.¹⁸

We have already seen that Paul did not hesitate to add to the kerygmatic tradition that he had received. The implication of there being different formulations of the gospel, some of which Paul accepted and others of which he rejected as 'no gospel' is that the kerygmatic tradition was also interpreted in the process of transmission. In fact, it is precisely the fact that as the church moved into new situations she found it necessary to interpret the gospel in those situations that best explains the multiplicity of formulations of the gospel.¹⁹

On the other hand, scholars like Dunn are 'probably overstating the case when they emphasize the 'differences and disagreements' between these formulations and are reluctant to speak of anything other than minimal agreement among them.²⁰ Other studies since the seminal work by C. H. Dodd (1944²) on the apostolic [p. 122](#) preaching

¹⁷ See e.g. C. Brown, 1978, 61.

¹⁸ Cf. Dunn (1977, 11–32 (31)). This diversity is confirmed by other texts as well. In [2 Cor. 11:4](#) Paul speaks of his opponents who 'preach a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached' and in [Phil. 1:15–18](#) of those who 'preach Christ' with ulterior motives. Irrespective of whether Paul accepted these versions of the kerygma as valid or not, the fact remains that there was a multiplicity of formulations.

¹⁹ Another avenue of research that would give us some understanding of how Paul handled what he 'received' is the study of pre-Pauline formulae in the Pauline corpus. A. M. Hunter's work (1961, 24–35, 120–122) was foundational.

²⁰ For a critique of Dunn's overemphasis on the diversity and his minimizing the unity in the New Testament writings see Carson, 1983, 65–95 (72ff.).

and its developments have shown that it is possible to identify the essentials of a 'common kerygma'.²¹ We will consider this further later.

Closely related to this issue, is another that is posed by the language that the apostle uses in [Gal. 1:12](#) in his defence of his apostolic commission and authority to proclaim the gospel. In this passage, the apostle insists, 'I did not receive it (the gospel) from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.' How is this statement to be reconciled with Paul's *paradosis* language in [1 Cor. 15:33ff.](#)? Now in [Gal. 1](#) Paul proceeds to refer to his confrontation with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus when he speaks of God being 'pleased to reveal his Son to me' ([1:16](#)). Therefore F. F. Bruce's resolution of the apparent tension between the 'gospel by revelation' and the 'gospel by tradition' is quite plausible: 'The gospel which Paul received without mediation on the Damascus road consisted in the revelation not of a fact but of a person—Jesus the risen Lord. On the other hand, the historical events of Holy Week and Easter and the following days were communicated to him by those who had experienced them first hand: in this sense he 'received' the gospel from others' (1970, 31).

However, there have been other attempts to resolve this tension too. Of these, perhaps the most noteworthy is that of O. Cullmann who has argued that revelation and the apostolic tradition are actually just two sides of the same coin since what was transmitted as tradition was at the same time continuously validated by the exalted Lord through his Spirit in the apostles.²² In other words, in Cullmann's opinion, the problem is an unreal one. Cullmann is not very convincing here; however, in his discussion he puts his finger on two important points. Firstly, he draws attention to the fact that in the very passages where Paul makes reference to the gospel as revelation or as tradition—most importantly [Gal. 1:12ff.](#) and [1 Cor. 15:3ff.](#)—he makes reference also to his apostolic commission. The significance of this observation is this: in spite of the observation made above that Christian tradition was apparently transmitted in a manner analogous to that by which rabbinic tradition was transmitted, there is an important difference—namely, the mediator of the Christian tradition is not the teacher, the rabbi, as in rabbinic tradition, but the apostle as direct witness (1956, 72). Cullmann's second point is that 'the principle of succession does not work mechanically as with the rabbis, but is bound to the Holy Spirit' (1956, 72). G. E. Ladd has taken the discussion further. He underlines the significance of the dual nature of the tradition as kerygmatic-pneumatic: 'it is kerygmatic because it can be p. 123 perpetuated only as kerygma and received as a confession of faith. It is pneumatic because it can be received and preserved only by the enabling of the Spirit' (1970, 226). Moreover, we can now understand better how the tradition can be both a fixed and growing tradition. On the one hand, certain formulations of the gospel were regarded as dangerous deviations from the accepted core of fixed tradition and emphatically rejected as such; on the other hand, there was apparently an expectation that the apostles would be guided by the Holy Spirit in the task of adding to the tradition as the situation required and of interpreting the tradition—unfolding and elaborating on God's redemptive purpose in Christ. Indeed it was understood that the primary apostolic functions included not only the propagation of the tradition but also its preservation from corruption with human tradition (cf. [Col. 2:8](#)) and from distortion by false apostles who preached a Jesus other than that of the apostolic tradition.²³

²¹ See Dunn, 1977, 29f for a basic summary of this 'common kerygma'.

²² (1956, 66ff.) See, however, R. Y. K. Fung, 1985, 23–41(37). See too S. Kim, 1982, 67ff.; and J. H. Schuetz, 1975, 54ff.

²³ See Ladd, 1970, 228; also Schuyler Brown, 1984, 474–480.

The traditions about Jesus

There is ample evidence in the Pauline letters that the apostle was familiar with various traditions of the works and words of Jesus.²⁴ However, there are two passages that are of special significance. In [1 Cor. 7](#), while dealing with various issues relating to marriage and singleness, the apostle makes a point which he buttresses with a quotation of a dominical ruling (vv. [10f.](#)). It is most likely that Paul is quoting from tradition;²⁵ it is interesting, however, to notice how Paul handles this tradition that he had received. To the dominical ruling: 'A wife must not separate from her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife' he first adds a gloss: 'But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband' and then proceeds to relate this teaching to the context of the Gentile mission, which had obviously not been in view in the original setting of Jesus' ministry. In other words, once more we see the apostle Paul adapting the tradition of Jesus' teaching to the context which he was addressing in his letter.²⁶

On the other hand, it is important to note that Paul is careful to make a distinction between the points in his argument for which he could cite support from the tradition of Jesus' teaching and other points for which he could not cite a specific word. This is significant because it is assumed too easily in some scholarly circles that a large number of the sayings in the Jesus tradition are not authentic but are later creations by [p. 124](#) the church.²⁷ Sometimes this scepticism regarding the gospel tradition is related to the understanding of the role of prophets in the early church. James Dunn is representative of many scholars when he says 'The fact that so many traditions of Jesus' words and deeds were preserved indicates that they were treasured by the earliest communities ... and played an authoritative role in shaping their teaching and practice. But the traditions themselves were not thought of as already cast in a ... finally authoritative form, and their authority was subject to the adaptation and interpretation called forth by the prophetic Spirit in changing circumstances' (1977, 75). But Dunn also identifies various sayings in the gospels and which he labels as 'promises spoken in the name of the exalted Jesus by an early Christian prophet' or as 'prophetic interpretations' of other sayings.²⁸ Now it may be conceded that prophets and other teachers in the Christian community may have played a part in the process of adapting sayings of Jesus to the post-Easter situation by the church in a manner analogous to the peshar-technique employed at Qumran. Even so, in the words of David Hill, 'that is not the same thing as ascribing to them the creation *ex nihilo* of sayings of Jesus' (1974, 264).²⁹

²⁴ See e.g. D. L. Dungan, 1971.

²⁵ Some scholars (e.g. Cullmann, 1956, 68; Dunn, 1977) argue on the basis of the present tense in this verse that Paul intends to say that it is the exalted Lord who addresses the Corinthians through the tradition. This seems rather unnecessary.

²⁶ Cf. K. Wegenast, 1978, 774: 'For Paul, tradition is not sacrosanct; this adjective can be applied only to the gospel, which is anterior to all tradition.' See too Dungan's treatment of this passage (1971, 81ff.).

²⁷ Cf. D. Guthrie, 'A careful examination of the variety of theories which have been proposed does not lead to a convincing conclusion that communities are likely to have created the core of the gospel material. It would be necessary, first, to demonstrate that communities do create traditions, which confirm what they have already come to believe, but this has never been done' (1986, 19).

²⁸ (1977, 74). This scepticism is to a large extent associated with R. Bultmann, 1968, 127f. and others who follow him like N. Perrin, 1967, 15; and Kasemann, 1969, 66–81. See also W. R. Farmer, 1982, 63–66.

²⁹ David Hill's conclusion is worth quoting: 'The evidence produced and repeated in support of the contention that the Christian prophets played a creative role in respect of sayings later attributed to the

The other passage that is of relevance to our discussion is Paul's quotation of the tradition of the institution of the Lord's Supper in [1 Cor. 11:23ff](#). In this passage Paul uses the standard terminology relating to traditional teaching—'I received ... what I also passed on to you'—indicating quite clearly that what follows is part of the Jesus tradition. A comparison of Paul's account with those in the synoptic gospels confirms some of the conclusions already reached above—namely, that although there is a fixed core of tradition, there is evidence of both interpretative additions as well as conflation.³⁰ However, we need to consider further the significance of Paul saying that he had received this 'from the Lord' (*apo tou kyriou*). Now the most obvious meaning is that Paul sees the earthly Jesus as the ultimate source of this tradition. However, there appears to be a growing scholarly consensus that what these words signify is that the authority for the tradition being quoted is not so much the earthly Jesus as the exalted Lord.³¹ Perhaps the person who has done most to bring about this change in scholarly opinion is Oscar Cullmann (1956, 67f.). He says, 'The formula in [1 Cor. 11:23](#) refers to the Christ who is present, in that he stands behind the transmission of the tradition, that is, he works in it. It is the united testimony of all the apostles which constitutes the Christian *paradosis*, in which the *Kyrios* himself is at work' (ibid, 68). On the basis of [2 Cor. 3:18](#) Cullmann goes on to argue that it is precisely because the Jesus tradition was transmitted by the apostles under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit who is identical with the exalted Lord that this tradition is actually contrasted with human tradition in various texts.

Not all that Cullmann holds has been accepted by other scholars. However, his interpretation of [1 Cor. 11:23](#) as a reference to the tradition being authorized by the exalted Lord has been widely accepted. Even some of those who still hold the older interpretation allow also for this newer interpretation of this text.³² If this is a correct way of understanding the text, then it is a valid conclusion that 'it was due to the office of the apostolate that the link between the Crucified and the Exalted, between the earthly Jesus and the Christ of the proclamation, was preserved'.³³

Of course, we have learned a lot about how the traditions about Jesus were regarded and handled in the early church from the critical study of the gospels. We know now that during the early period these traditions were used in various contexts in the life of the church—in its preaching and worship,³⁴ controversy,³⁵ and in the instruction of its members.³⁶ We also have a good understanding of how both the narrative traditions of Jesus as well as the traditions of his teaching were both preserved and shaped in the course of transmission. In summary, there is clear evidence, on the one hand, that the message of the earthly Jesus was seen by the early churches as having a continuing

earthly Jesus proves, on examination, to be lacking in substance and authority.' (1974, 273). See too the comments of G. Fee, 1987, 292 n.8.

³⁰ See Bruce, 1970, 33–36.

³¹ See Dunn, 1977, 67; Bruce, 1970, 33.

³² See e.g. G. Fee, 1987, 548f.: 'Paul probably means ... that Jesus himself is the ultimate source of the tradition. It may also be that latent in such language is his understanding that the Lord, now risen and exalted, is still responsible by his Spirit for the transmission of such tradition within the church.'

³³ D. Mueller, 1986, 135.

³⁴ Cf. M. Dibelius, 1934, 17ff; C. H. Dodd, 1944², 17ff.

³⁵ Form critics have drawn our attention to the controversies in which the early Christians engaged as a formative factor in the growth of the gospel tradition. See e.g. R. Bultmann, 1963, 39ff.

³⁶ See Bruce, 1970, 65ff.; Dunn, 1977, 145.

importance for them. On the other hand, it was authoritative for them only as interpreted tradition. Therefore, Dunn is fully justified in concluding that the authority of the tradition lay 'not in its historical point of origin so much as in the fact that it was spoken by the one who was now present as Lord of the community and that it could be regarded as expressing his present will' (1977, 78).

The ethical tradition

In several of his letters the apostle Paul exhorts his readers by appealing to 'the traditions' that he had passed on to them (cf. [1 Cor. 11:2](#); [Phil. 4:9](#); [Col. 2:6](#); [1 Thess. 4:1](#); [2 Thess. 2:15](#); [3:6](#)). Besides the kerygmatic and historical traditions that [p. 126](#) we have already considered, there was apparently a wide range of ethical and moral instruction included in these traditions. An analysis of this catechetical material has revealed that much of it was based on the traditions of Jesus' teaching and ministry.³⁷ It is interesting, however, that it is not very often that the earthly Jesus is appealed to as a model for behaviour. Rather, the apostle appeals to his own example, even as he follows the example of Christ (cf. [1 Cor. 4:17](#); [11:1](#); [Phil. 3:17](#)). There have been various suggested explanations of this, but perhaps the most plausible is that it is related to Paul's apostolic selfunderstanding. 'Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice' ([Phil. 4:9](#)). And like the appeal to his message, the appeal to follow his example carries force only to the extent to which he follows Christ.³⁸

Tradition in the Pastorals and later New Testament writings

It is evident that the attitude to tradition in the Pastorals is somewhat different from that in the main letters of the Pauline corpus. The terminology used to refer to the apostolic tradition is different,³⁹ and the primary concern now is to keep, hold firmly to, and guard the teaching that has been entrusted to their care. The process of using, adapting and interpreting the tradition is coming to an end, or, perhaps, is over; in fact, the very terms *paradosis* (tradition) and *paradidomi* (pass on) are replaced by the terms *paratheke* (deposit) and *paratithemai* (entrust). It would appear that the tradition is well on its way to becoming crystallized into set forms.

Of the other New Testament writings, however, it would appear that it is only in Jude and 2 Peter that this stage in the development of the tradition has been reached. In Jude there is reference to '(contending) for the faith that God has once for all entrusted to the saints' (v. [3](#)) and in 2 Peter to '(being firmly established) in the truth you now have' ([1:12](#) cf. [3:2](#)). However, it needs to be said that it hardly would be a fair assessment of the evidence to refer to the understanding of the tradition even in these books in terms of the 'rule of faith' of Early Catholicism.

Also, the community's role in preserving the tradition must be recognized. To begin with, there were the original eye-witnesses, the apostles themselves, to check and correct the oral traditions in the churches; in due course, this apostolic witness was put down in writings, and the process of building up a recognized body of writings began. Until such time that there was such a body of accredited writings, the community had no alternative

³⁷ Cf. Hunter, 1961, 52–57; 128–131; Dodd, 1968, 11–29; Riesenfeld, 1970, 1–29 (17); Dunn, 1977, 68f. See too the interesting article on 'the Holy Word' by J. Arthur Baird, 1987, 585–599.

³⁸ Cf. W. P. De Boer, 1962; also J. L. White, 1983, 433–444 (441).

³⁹ See Dunn, 1977, 69 for a summary. However, it is still going beyond the evidence to conclude that there is by this time a recognized body of tradition which has been accepted as the test of orthodoxy.

but to be responsible for ensuring the essential accuracy of the tradition. This is reflected in the appeal to ‘the Lord and the p. 127 Apostles’ in the early Apostolic Fathers.⁴⁰

Tradition and Interpretation

In his analysis of the early Christian preaching, C. H. Dodd identified the fulfilment of the Jewish scriptures as one of the recurring themes. This insight has been confirmed by other studies, and developed further. ‘What they (the early Christians) sought in the ancient scriptures was not a code of commandments to regulate daily living, but a testimony to Christ and his gospel; and their whole interpretation was governed by the conviction that in him the scriptures were fulfilled.’⁴¹ On the other hand, even their interpretation of scripture was, in the ultimate analysis, subordinate to the apostolic witness to Christ. This is important, because the contention of some scholars that narratives were created to establish the fulfilment of scripture has not been established.⁴²

III. THE APOSTOLIC TRADITION AND THE NT CANON

The advance of history and the lapse of time made it necessary, in due course, for the church to determine its doctrinal norm by forming a Canon. Now there is a lack of consensus among scholars regarding whether apostolicity—apostolic authority, if not apostolic authorship—was an important criterion of New Testament canonicity. However, the fact that by the time the process was completed, ‘every document that could colourably be called apostolic found its place’⁴³ in the canon testifies to the attitude in the church to the apostolic witness to Christ. The evidence clearly supports Cullmann’s contention that ‘the fixing of the Christian canon of scripture means that the church itself, at a given time, traced a clear and definite line of demarcation between the period of the apostles and that of the church, between the time of foundation and that of construction, between the apostolic tradition and ... ecclesiastical tradition’ (1956, 89). And R. P. C. Hanson makes a further point. ‘If it is accepted’ he says, ‘that the primary function of the books of the New Testament is, and always was, ... to act as evidence (to the historical events of Christ’s life, death and resurrection), ... then the conclusion is inescapable that in forming the Canon of the New Testament the Church put itself under the authority of the New Testament’s witness and abdicated its right of adding or subtracting from this witness’ (1962, 235).

James Dunn (1977, 374ff) in seeking to answer the query, ‘Has the canon a continuing function?’ has some extremely useful comments to make. The New Testament canonizes the range of acceptable diversity of Christianity but also the limits of acceptable diversity. ‘If the conviction that God meets us now through p. 128 the one who was Jesus of Nazareth marks the beginning and heart of Christianity’ (p. 387)⁴⁴. It also serves as canon in that

⁴⁰ See C. F. Moule, 1966, 178–209 (182); D. A. Dunbar, 1987, 323ff.; J. L. White, 1983, 433–444 (437); also D. M. Bossman, 1987, 3–9.

⁴¹ F. W. Beare, 1962, 520–532 (521); Bruce, 1970, 74–86; C. K. Barrett, 1973, 1–23 (16); R. N. Longenecker, 1975, *passim*. But see the reservations expressed by W. C. Kaiser, Jr., 1985, 228.

⁴² On this see Moule, 1966, 63–85 (84).

⁴³ F. F. Bruce, 1970, 138.

⁴⁴ Cf. too H. Y. Gamble, 1985, 92: ‘The boundaries of the canon rule out certain particular interpretations and some types of interpretation, but the same boundaries encompass a range of other interpretations.’

through it alone we have access to the events which determined the character of Christianity. 'The portraits of Jesus and statements of Jesus which we find in the NT are normative, not in themselves but in the sense that only in and through these portraits can we see the man behind them, only in and through these statements can we encounter the original reality of the Christ-event' (ibid.).⁴⁵

The church will always have the task of interpreting the biblical message in contemporary and contextual categories. And it is promised the help of the same Holy Spirit who inspired the apostolic witness. In this sense, church tradition stands in the same line of development as the apostolic tradition. However, there is a crucial difference. In translating scripture into the language of today, the church is fulfilling its duty for its own period, and is not doing something which binds all future generations in the same way that scripture does. 'Only the traditions of the New Testament can serve as a norm for the authenticity of what we call Christian, only they can fill the word "Jesus" with authoritative meaning' (Dunn, 1977, 383).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Commentaries

- F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians* (Pateroster, Exeter, 1982).
 C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St Mark* (Cup, Cambridge, 1972).
 G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1987).
 R. T. France, *Matthew* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1985).
 R. Gundry, *Matthew* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1982).
 R. Gundry, *Mark* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1993).
 D. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1972).
 W. L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (M. M. & S., London, 1974).
 I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1978).

Other Books and Articles

- J. Arthur Baird, 'The Holy Word: The History and Function of the Teachings of Jesus in the Theology and Praxis of the Early Church' *NTStud* 33, 1987, 585–599.
 R. Banks (ed.) *Reconciliation and Hope (Fs. L. L. Morris)* (Pateroster, Exeter, 1974).
 R. Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (CUP, Cambridge, 1975).
 C. K. Barrett, 'The Bible in the New Testament Period' in D. E. Nineham, *The Church's Use of the Bible* 1–24.
 James Barr, *Old and new in interpretation: a study of the two testaments* (SCM, London, 1966).
 D. L. Bartlett, *The Shape of Scriptural Authority* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1983).
 I. W. Batdorf, art. 'Tradition of the elders', *Interpreter's Bible Dictionary*, (1962) 685. p. 129
 F. W. Beare, art. 'Canon of the New Testament', *Interpreter's Bible Dictionary*, (1962) 520–532.
 D. M. Bossman, 'Authority and Tradition in First Century Judaism and Christianity' *BibTheolBull* 17, 1987, 3–9.

Thus the canon is a compromise between the single and specific ground of faith—the Christevent—and the multiplicity of its interpretive appropriations.'

⁴⁵ Bartlett, 1983, 217: 'Tradition is a defense in the church against individualism in interpretation. Tradition cannot and should not prevent new insight from edifying the church, but it can and should have a voice in evaluating its reliability.'

- C. Brown, art. 'The Structure and Content of the Early Kerygma' *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* Vol. 3 (1978) 57–67.
- S. Brown, 'Apostleship in the New Testament as an historical and theological problem' *NTStud* 30, 1984, 474–480.
- F. F. Bruce, *Tradition Old and New* (Patemaster, Exeter, 1970).
- R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic tradition* (ET, Oxford², 1968).
- G. B. Caird, *The Apostolic Age* (Duckworth, London, 1982).
- D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (IVP, Leicester, 1983).
- D. A. Carson, 'Unity and Diversity in the New Testament ...' in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, edd., *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (IVP, Leicester, 1986), 65–95.
- P. M. Casey, 'Culture and Historicity: the Plucking of the Grain ([Mk. 2:23–28](#))' *NTStud* 34, 1988, 1–23.
- A. C. Clark, 'Apostleship' *Evangelical Review of Theology* 13, 1989, 344–382.
- O. Cullman, *The Tradition' in The Early Church* (SCM, London, 1956), 66ff.
- W. D. Davies, art. 'Law in the New Testament', *Interpreter's Bible Dictionary* (1962) 95ff.
- C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (Nisbet, Welwyn, 1952).
- D. A. Dunbar, 'The Biblical Canon' in D. A. Carson and J. Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, 299–360.
- D. L. Dungan, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1971).
- J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (SCM, London, 1975).
- J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (SCM, London, 1977).
- J. D. G. Dunn, '[Mark 2:1–3:6](#): A Bridge Between Jesus and Paul on the question of the law' *NTStud* 30, 1984, 395–415.
- R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Tyndale, London, 1971).
- R. Y. K. Fung, 'Revelation and Tradition: the origin of Paul's Gospel', *Evangelical Quarterly* 57, 1985, 23–41.
- W. W. Gasque and R. P. Martin (edd.) *Apostolic History and the Gospel* (Fs. F. F. Bruce) (Patemaster, Exeter, 1970).
- R. H. Gundry, 'The Hellenization of Dominical Tradition and Christianization of Jewish Tradition in the eschatology of 1-2 Thessalonians' *NTStud* 33, 1987, 161–178.
- D. Guthrie, 'Biblical authority and New Testament scholarship', *Vox Evangelica* 16, 1986, 7–23.
- R. P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (SCM, London, 1962).
- M. Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul* (ET, SCM, London, 1983).
- D. Hill, 'On the evidence for the Creative Role of Christian prophets' *NTStud* 20, 1973–74, 262–74.
- A. M. Hunter, *Paul and his Predecessors* (SCM, London, 1961).
- J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology (Vol. I)* (ET, SCM, London, 1971).
- Kaiser, Jr., W. C., *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Chicago, Moody Press, 1985).
- S. Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1982).
- B. Klappert, art. 'Word' *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* Vol. 3 (1978), 1087–1117.
- G. E. Ladd, 'Revelation and Tradition in Paul' in *Apostolic History and the Gospel* 223–230.
- R. N. Langenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1975). [p. 130](#)
- C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament* (A. & C. Black, London, 1966).
- D. Mueller, art. 'Apostle', *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Vol. 1) (Zondervan², Grand Rapids, 1986) 128–135.
- D. E. Nineham, *The Church's Use of the Bible* (SPCK, London, 1963).
- N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (London, 1961).

- Clark H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1984).
 H. Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition* (Fortress, Philadelphia, 1970).
 H. Ridderbas, art. 'The Earliest Confession of the Atonement in Paul' in *Reconciliation and Hope* pp 76–89.
 J. H. Schuetz, *Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority* (Cambridge, 1975).
 G. N. Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching* (CUP, Cambridge, 1974).
 R. H. Stein, '[Lk. 1:1–4](#) and Traditionsgeschichte' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26 (1983) 421–430.
 K. Wegenast, art. 'paradidomi' in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* Vol. 3 (1978), 772–775.
 K. Wegenast, art. 'Teach' in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* Vol. 3 (1978) 759–765.
 J. L. White, 'Saint Paul and the Apostolic Letter Tradition, *CBQ* 45, 1983, 433–444.

Dr. Brian Wintle is Principal of Union Biblical Seminary, Pune, India. **p. 131**

III

Scripture and Tradition in the Orthodox Church

James Stamoolis

ORTHODOXY AS THE TRUE CHURCH

The concept of being the true Christian church is the dominant theme of Eastern Christendom. 'Orthodoxy is the Church of Christ on earth.'¹ There is a strong, even overpowering sense of tradition that envelops the whole body of believers.² This awareness is a mark that affects everything about the church. Panagiotis Bratsiotis asserts that the fundamental principle of Orthodoxy is 'the idea that the Orthodox Church adheres to the principles and piety of *early, undivided Catholic Church*'.³

¹ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Morehouse Publishing Co., 1935), p. 9. This is the opening sentence of Bulgakov's work on the church.

² This concept is stressed in teaching Orthodox youth about their church. There is an emphasis on being the true church. Cf. the Sunday School manual by Stan W. Carlson and Leonid Soroka entitled *Faith of Our Fathers* (Minneapolis: Olympic Press, 1962), p. 6.

³ 'The Fundamental Principles and Main Characteristics of the Orthodox Church,' in *The Orthodox Ethos*, ed., by A. J. Phyllippou (Oxford: Holywell Press, 1964), p. 24.

According to the Eastern Orthodox, the early church was steadfastly devoted to holy tradition and therefore this is an essential characteristic that must be maintained.⁴ 'We derive our knowledge of the teaching of the Christian Religion from Holy Scripture and Sacred Tradition, which we therefore call the *sources of our Religion*.'⁵ It is thus a 'treasure' that must be carefully guarded.

There have been overtures from Protestant Churches to the Eastern Church since the Reformation. None has been successful at bringing about union, any more than the attempts at union in the waning centuries of the Byzantine Empire when the East sought the military might of the West. All have floundered on the exclusivistic claims of the Orthodox Church. At the heart of these claims is the position that the Orthodox Church and only the Orthodox Church has guarded the deposit of divine truth. p. 132

THE TWO SOURCES OF REVELATION

The official position of the Orthodox Church is stated very distinctly in several places.⁶ The *1962 Almanac* of the Greek Archdiocese of North and South America contains the following statement:

Eternal truths are expressed in the Holy Scriptures and the Sacred Tradition, both of which are equal and are represented pure and unadulterated by the true Church established by Christ to continue His mission: man's salvation.⁷

In the *Greek Orthodox Catechism*, Divine Revelation is identified as the source from which Christianity draws all its truths.

As, however, those things which God revealed to man were promulgated either from mouth to mouth, or by the written word, we say, therefore, that Christianity has two sources: the oral Divine Revelation or *Holy Tradition*, and the written Divine Revelation or *Holy Scripture*.⁸

While all revelation comes from God so that one can speak of a single divine source or single Christian tradition, there is still the concept of the two channels in which this revelation reaches the church. Indeed according to the Orthodox Church, it is imperative to think in terms of these two channels because not everything necessary for salvation can be found in Scripture.

Archbishop Michael clearly expresses this point of view when he writes, '... there exist in Tradition elements which, although not mentioned in the New Testament as they are in the Church today, are indispensable to the salvation of our souls.' An example is how tradition supplies the words of invocation at the Eucharist. Without these words, '... It is

⁴ Stefan Zankov, *The Eastern Orthodox Church* trans. by Donald A. Lowrie (London: SMC Press Ltd., 1929), p. 33.

⁵ Frank Gavin, *Some Aspects of Contemporary Greek Orthodox Thought* (Milwaukee: Morehouse Publishing Co., 1923), p. 17. Gavin is quoting the *Orthodox Catechism* of Balanos which was published in Athens in 1920.

⁶ One must be careful to distinguish between official positions (those held by the church at large as a result of the decisions of ecumenical councils or local councils that have received universal support) and the theologoumena, i.e., theological opinions. Many beliefs are theologoumena and are not binding on other believers. Cf. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 319.

⁷ *1962 Almanac* (New York: Greek Archdiocese of North and South America. 1962). p. 195.

⁸ Constantine N. Callinicos, *The Greek Orthodox Catechism* (New York: Greek Archdiocese of North and South America, 1960), p.6.

impossible to have the sacred mystery of the Eucharist; but without the mystery ... there is no salvation for the soul.’⁹

Orthodox theologians are in agreement that there is no conflict existing between the two sources. Instead, the two sources are viewed as complementary. The whole content of Christian tradition provides the dogmatic base for the church. The Bible is part of this overarching tradition. The several components of the tradition are also expressions of the source of ultimate authority, the Triune God.¹⁰ p. 133

The content of the tradition is found in the decisions of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, certain local or regional councils, the statements of individual bishops, the Fathers, the Liturgy, canon law and icons. Of the above, the Ecumenical Councils have irrevocable authority. However the process of acceptance of a council as ecumenical was by no means automatic. The Council of Nicaea (325) was not recognized for more than fifty years, but it later became the symbol of what an ecumenical council was to be. The Council of Ephesus (449), which was declared to be ecumenical, was later repudiated. How does one determine which councils are ecumenical? The final judge of a council is the Holy Spirit. This is because any council which truly represents the church and is gathered together in the name of Christ ‘will certainly be inspired by the Holy, Spirit and will therefore be infallible’.¹¹ The Spirit expresses himself through the church. Thus we can speak of the church recognizing this or that council to be ecumenical. The period of the Ecumenical Councils has great significance for Orthodoxy. It is regarded as a normative period because not only were the great dogmatical forms determined, but also the basis of the canon law was laid down.

THE ROLE OF TRADITION AS THE INTERPRETER OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

Eastern Orthodoxy considers the Bible to be the possession of the church. Therefore it follows that the church, not the Bible, has final authority. The Bible is only one aspect of the deposit of divine revelation given to the church. As the guardian of this divine revelation, the church has the sole right and obligation to interpret and convey the message of the Bible. ‘The Church alone can interpret Holy Scripture with authority.’¹²

It has always been admitted that there are portions of the Scriptures that are unclear. Within the Bible itself, a warning is given against those who would use the sacred text for their own ends.¹³ However, it appears that the church’s right of interpretation covers not

⁹ ‘Orthodox Theology,’ *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, III, 1 (Summer, 1957).

¹⁰ Cf. the article ‘Tradition and Traditions,’ *St. Valadimir’s Seminary Quarterly*, VII (1963), 102–114 by Metropolitan Athenagoras in which he speaks of all Christian tradition stemming from Christ and his life. The Metropolitan distinguishes four channels, not just two (written and unwritten tradition). He laments the lack of interest in the other channels, the theandric life of Christ and the reproduction of that life in his apostle. A similar viewpoint was expressed in the decrees of Vatican II. The ‘Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation’ speaks of the unity of sacred tradition and sacred Scripture. Walter Abbot, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: American Pres, 1966), p. 117. Cf. Christopher Butler, *The Theology of Vatican II* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, Ltd., 1967), pp. 41–46. Also cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism*, trans. by Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Win. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), pp. 89–111.

¹¹ John Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church, Its Past and Its Role in the World Today*, trans. by John Chopin (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1962), p. 31.

¹² Ware, *The Orthodox Church* p. 207.

¹³ For Example, Peter speaks about the ignorant (*amathesis*) and unstable (*asterktoi*) who twist the difficult parts of Paul’s letters as they do with other Scriptures. [2 Pet. 3:16](#).

only what might be considered obscure passages, but covers the whole text. 'Orthodox, when they read the Scripture, accept the guidance of the Church.'¹⁴ Ware cites as his authority the *Confession of Dositheus*. This seventeenth century document arose out of the conflict between 'traditional' Orthodoxy and the Calvinistic party of Cyril Lucar. It is admitted by Orthodox theologians that the reaction to Calvinism borrowed from Roman Catholic sources. And while p. 134 Dositheus is regarded as being Orthodox in spirit, he did employ Latin terminology in his *Confession*.¹⁵ Ware refers to Article II in the *Confession of Dositheus* which is in essential agreement with the Tridentine decree. Phillip Schaff gives the following summary of the article:

The Holy Scriptures must be interpreted, not by private judgment but in accordance with the tradition of the Catholic Church, which can not err, or deceive, or be deceived, and is of equal authority with the Scriptures.¹⁶

It should be remembered that this confession was a point by point refutation of the confession of faith circulated under the name of Cyril Lucar. Article II of Lucar's confession maintained that the authority of the Scriptures is superior to that of the church. In his second edition, the perpicuity of Scriptures in matters of faith is declared.¹⁷

Two things should be clear. The first is that the Orthodox Church clearly rejected the Reformation position of the authority of the Scriptures. The overwhelming sentiment against such views is indicated by the three-fold anathema pronounced by the Synod of Jerusalem (1762) against the heretical Calvinistic doctrines.

The second point to note is that the *Confession of Dositheus* holds to a two source theory. Both Scripture and tradition are necessary for a correct understanding of the Orthodox faith. The problem is what is the relationship between them. How does tradition serve as an interpreter of the Scripture? To answer this question, we must look at the hermeneutical principles used by the Orthodox Church. It is an exceedingly difficult area to investigate but there are some important distinctions made by Orthodox scholars. Writing in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Nikos Nissiotis attempts to offer aid in the area of the prolegoma to hermeneutics. He outlines several key principles that the Orthodox believer must take into account 'before entering the complexities of the hermeneutical problem'.¹⁸

Nissiotis deals with the key issue of authority. His conclusion is that the authority belongs to the church, but that this authority relies on the believing community, both clergy and laity. What significance does this have for exegesis? This presents an entirely different question from the p. 135 question faced by the West, in both the Roman Catholic

¹⁴ Ware, *Orthodox Church* p. 208.

¹⁵ Cf. John Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1962), p. 96.

¹⁶ *Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, n.d.), p. 63 The Greek text of the *Confession of Dositheus* is found in *Creeds*, Vol. II, pp. 401–444.

¹⁷ *Creeds*, Vol. I, p. 57. For the complete text of Lucar's confession see *The Synod of Sixteen Seventy-two: Acts and Decrees of the Jerusalem Synod held under Dositheus Containing the Confession Published Under the Name of Cyril Lukaris*, trans. and ed. by J. N. W. B. Robertson (London, 1899, reprinted New York: AMS Press, 1970). The *Confession* is also found in George A. Hadjiantoniou, *Protestant Patriarch: The Life of Cyril Lucaris (1572–1638)* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1961), pp. 141–145. Lucar was a regularly elected Patriarch of Constantinople who was a Calvinist. His *Confession* is a high water mark of Protestant influence in the Orthodox Church as far as the hierarchy is concerned.

¹⁸ Nikos A. Nissiotis, 'The Unity of Scripture and Tradition, an Orthodox Contribution to the Prolegomena of Hermeneutics', *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, XI, 2 (Winter, 1965–66), 204.

and the Protestant churches. The discussion about authority or the guarantee of right biblical exegesis is foreign to the Orthodox Church. The conception of exegesis is totally different. Nissiotis attempts to express the Orthodox hermeneutical principles regarding authority in the following way.

The Orthodox regard exegeses as an offering of the whole community, as the voice of the Church in a given situation, a reinterpretation which helps the believers struggling in this world and for this world to readapt the message of the Gospel to a new situation.¹⁹

This is really the key to the Orthodox Church's concept of the unity of tradition and Scripture. Everything revolves around the concept of the church as a whole being the guardian of truth. Therefore the other principles that must be believed before the problem of hermeneutics is discussed all revolve around the church. For example, Nissiotis does not want hermeneutics left as the exclusive domain of New Testament scholars and exegetes. He feels that the specialist is more concerned with the methodological problem and does not pay attention to the other uses of the Bible, if only for their devotional or liturgical life.

Thus everything is arranged around the ecclesiological presupposition which views the church as the ultimate authority on earth. Furthermore, the church is the central focus of all Christian work. All the gifts of the Spirit were given to enable her to be strengthened. However, the prophetic charisma was not exercised by Paul on the question of receiving Gentiles into the Church until he had received the unanimous support of the Church in Jerusalem ([Ac. 15:22](#)). Nissiotis sees this approach to be a key principle in hermeneutics. "This phrase "Then it seemed good to the apostles and elders, with the whole church," must be the basis for all efforts to build up the Christian community and interpret the Scriptures.'²⁰

The needs of the witnessing community are met by the application and interpretation of Scripture. The task is undertaken for the purpose of meeting these needs and the church as a whole is responsible for this task.

Guidelines can be drawn according to this ecclesiological principle when there are apparent contradictions between the biblical authors. The problem of interpreting the whole of revelation is for the Orthodox not a problem of systematizing the various scriptural passages. In fact nothing could be farther from the spirit of Orthodoxy. The Bible is not regarded as giving a blueprint for organization or a systematic exposition of moral teaching or dogmatic theology. "The Bible is the book of life of the Ecclesia, it does not dictate to it rules of behaviour and canon p. 136 laws.'²¹ Rather the Bible is the revelation of God in history, dealing more with the acts of God and the Christian community. This should not be construed to mean that the Orthodox are not concerned with the revelation of propositional truth, for they most certainly are. It only means that with reference to the Bible, there is no systematic presentation of this truth.²²

The lack of a systematic framework in the Bible is balanced by the unity that is established with tradition. Since the Spirit that inspired the Bible also inspires the church

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ 'The Unity', p. 205. From a Protestant viewpoint this interpretation mistakenly calls the 'Council of Jerusalem' an Ecumenical Council when it would appear to be only a conference of local churches. For a classic defence of the Protestant position, see A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1967), pp. 908–914.

²¹ Nissiotis, 'The Unity', p. 206.

²² Florovsky, 'Revelation', p. 174.

in its tradition, any logical contradictions or apparent deficiencies are eliminated.²³ This view follows logically from the Orthodox Church's position on the Bible. Therefore, tradition and Scripture are a team, both working together for the salvation of humankind, both vital parts of the Christian community.

The appeal to tradition as an interpreter of Scripture apparently arose out of the needs of the early church. In the controversies with various heretics, those who were orthodox, i.e. those who held the traditional view, needed some source to reinforce their interpretation of the Scripture. An appeal to the Bible seemed to be insufficient because the heretics cited scriptural passages to support their positions. For example, the Arians claimed their view was biblical. But one can go back even earlier for the problem did not arise for the first time in the fourth century. In the second century Gnostics, Sabellians and Montonists also appealed to the Bible. Who was to decide the issue? What were the principles of interpretation?

It was in this historical situation that the authority of Tradition was first invoked. Scripture belonged to the Church, and it was only in the Church, within the community of right faith, that Scripture could be adequately understood and correctly interpreted. Heretics, that is those outside of the Church, had no key to the mind of the Scripture. It was not enough just to read and to quote scriptural words—the true meaning or intent, of scripture, taken as an integrated whole, had to be elicited.²⁴

Thus the church which has the true meaning of Scripture alone could interpret the Scripture. This meaning was contained in the apostolic tradition which the church preserved. Florovsky points out that for the Fathers, Scripture and tradition were always connected. Without the correct 'rule' of interpretation, the Bible was merely words; tradition supplies the key to interpretation.

With tradition playing such a vital role in the understanding of the faith, it is obvious that the bearer of tradition is charged with an exceedingly important role. The church is therefore central in the task of exegesis. However, the early Fathers, for example, Tertullian, did not claim authority for the church. As Florovsky expresses it:

The Church was not an external authority, which had to judge over [p. 137](#) the Scripture, but rather the keeper and guardian of that Divine Truth which was stored and deposited in Holy Writ.²⁵

It can be seen that quite early in the history of the church the question of tradition came up. The appeal to the continuity with the apostolic faith is understandable. It is always the appeal of those wishing to underscore their link with the past. There is little problem in applying this principle when one of the opposing parties claims a new revelation. The problem becomes more difficult when both sides appeal to the ancient tradition and both claim to be the lineal descendants of the earlier custodians of the faith. For this reason, both Protestants and the Roman Catholics attempted to discover in the Eastern Orthodox Church elements that would support their respective positions.

The replies of Jeremiah II to the Lutheran Reformers (1573–81) have taken on a confession or dogmatic significance in the Orthodox Church. Jeremiah II was the first

²³ Nissiotis, 'The Unity', p. 206.

²⁴ Georges Florovsky, 'The Function of Tradition in the Ancient Church'. *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, IX, 2 (Winter, 1963–64), 183.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 184. Cf. Ellen Flesseman-van-Leer, *Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp., 1954) for a discussion of the views of the second century Christian writers. Also cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), pp. 29–79.

official Orthodox response to the Reformation. Jeremiah II calls on the Lutherans to return to the true faith as found in the Orthodox Church. He broke off the correspondence when the Lutherans persisted in seeking his recognition of the validity of the Reformation.

The Reformers, from the Orthodox point of view, were correct in appealing to the Orthodox Church. From the Orthodox point of view they, unlike the Western Church, preserved the true tradition. The church would have ceased to have been the church if she had departed from the holy tradition. It is the very historical continuity with the early church that marks Orthodoxy as the true faith.

The result of the Orthodox Church's stand is to weld the Scripture to the tradition preserved in the church. One can speak of tradition standing over the Scripture, because the meaning of Scripture can be unlocked only by the key of tradition. Therefore, the hermeneutical bond between the two sources of faith, Scripture and tradition, in effect produces the single source that modern Orthodox theologians are so fond of speaking of as Christian tradition.²⁶

TRADITION: THE TESTS OF AUTHENTICITY

What constitutes authentic tradition? There are some criteria which the church used in determining the dogmatic symbols. For the most part, the criteria reflect the general acceptance of the symbol by a significant section of the church or its production by a recognized hierarchy. But it must always be remembered that these doctrinal statements while 'new' are held by the Orthodox to be only explications of what had already been held.

Therefore there are not what p. 138 might be called 'new' doctrines expressed in the church. The central tenets, for example, those defined by Ecumenical Councils must be adhered to by all Orthodox. This is not because Ecumenical Councils are the supreme authority, but because the decrees of Ecumenical Councils have been recognized and witnessed by the whole church. It is precisely this universal recognition that makes a council ecumenical. As Bratsiotis expresses it: '... the decisive criterion of an Ecumenical Council is the recognition of its decrees by the whole Church, which is therefore in fact the sole authority in Orthodoxy.'²⁷

As the only authority, the church does have the role of deciding what is authentic tradition. Two facts must be noted at this point. The first is that there can be legitimate local tradition that does not have universal authority. In other words, national churches have the right to maintain certain practices that differ from other Orthodox Churches. The unity of the Orthodox Christians is not a unity of language, liturgical rite or baptismal creed. Rather the unity is a unity of faith which the national churches express in their own languages and rites.²⁸ This is a freedom that the East rejoices in and is considered to be a fundamental characteristic of Orthodoxy.

Strict conformity in matters of liturgical practices has never been considered to be a real obstacle to the reunion of the East and West. Meyendorff cites several important thinkers such as Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople (858–886), and Peter, Patriarch of Antioch (1052–56), who considered local practices, even those defined by local conciliar decrees, as matters of indifference. These practices in no way affected the unity of the

²⁶ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, pp. 204 ff; and Metropolitan Athenagoras, 'Tradition and Traditions', *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, VII (1963), 104.

²⁷ 'Fundamental Principles', p. 29.

²⁸ John Meyendorff, 'Tradition and Traditions', *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, VI (1962), 122.

faith. The main problem dividing East and West was seen in the doctrinal question of the procession of the Holy Spirit.²⁹

Within the central faith there remains room for the local practice to shine through, creating what might be considered a unique and expressive worship experience.³⁰

The second point to note is that there seem to be two tests to determine authentic tradition. The two are 1) apostolicity: the doctrine comes from the apostles who in turn received it directly from the Lord, p. 139 and 2) the concept of the universal acceptance on the part of the church, that is, decisions considered to be ecumenical because of recognition by the whole church. It is incorrect to view these doctrines as opposed to each other because no Orthodox theologian does so.

An illustration of the concept of apostolicity is found in an article by Archbishop Michael in which he refers to the tradition received from the apostles orally. This same tradition was handed on 'from generation to generation until it was embodied and codified in the works of the major Fathers of the Church and in the resolutions of the seven Ecumenical Councils and the ten local Synods of the Church.'³¹ There is no thought here of enlarging or changing the deposit of tradition. The Archbishop speaks against those who ignore or repudiate tradition (i.e. Protestants) and those who enlarge and add to tradition (i.e. Roman Catholics). Orthodoxy is seen to hold a 'middle-of-the-road-policy' by neither adding to or subtracting from the apostolic tradition.

The sentiment expressed by Archbishop Michael is common in the Orthodox Church which is by self definition the church of tradition.³² However, there is another test of the authenticity of tradition that can be employed but has not been used in recent history. This is the test of universal acceptance by the church. As has been shown above, this does not mean conformity in practice or liturgical rite, but in matters of faith.³³ The concept of

²⁹ John Meyendorf, 'The Meaning of Tradition', in *Scripture and Ecumenism*, ed. by Leonard J. Swidler (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1965), pp. 55–56. The significance of the *filioque* controversy is sometimes understated by those who are accustomed to reciting it in the Creed. Both the East and West teach the full divinity of the Holy Spirit; however, the Eastern Church maintains that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone through the Son, while the Western Church holds that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. The Latins felt the *filioque* (and the son) gave the Second Person of the Trinity the honour due him and the Greeks resented any change in an Ecumenical Creed without the approval of an Ecumenical Council, NJ: Reference Book Publishers, 1965), pp. 237–241.

³⁰ C. S. Lewis, writing on the experience of worship, said: 'What pleased me most about a Greek Orthodox mass I once attended was that there seemed to be no prescribed behaviour for the congregation.... The beauty of it was that nobody took the slightest notice of what anyone else was doing.' *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (London: Fontana Books, 1966), p. 12.

³¹ 'Orthodox Theology', *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, III, 1 (Summer, 1957), 13. The Archbishop does not list the ten local councils he considers authoritative.

³² Cf. Bratsiotis, 'Fundamental Principles', p. 24; Ware, *Orthodox Church*, pp. 203–204; Dean Timothy Andrews, *What Is The Orthodox Church?* (New York: Greek Archdiocese of North and South America, 1964), p. 7.

³³ 'Faith' in this content means the primary doctrinal definitions to which the entire church adheres. An example would be the question of the two natures of Christ which was decided at the fourth Ecumenical Council. The Copts, Ethiopians, Syro-Jacobites and Armenians broke with the Greek speaking churches over this point, it is quite significant that two theological consultations have been held between the Eastern (or Greek) Orthodox Churches and the Oriental (Non-Chalcedonian) Churches. These meetings centred on the basic difference between the groups in Christological dogma. For a complete text of the consultations see *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, X, 2 (Winter, 1964–65) for the meeting at the University of Aarhus in Denmark, and Vol. XIII, 2 (Fall, 1968) for the consultation at the University of Bristol, England.

universal recognition and acceptance by the church determines which councils are recognized by the Orthodox as ecumenical.³⁴

With the concept of universal acceptance as a test of tradition, it seems clear that the interpretation of the Faith of the church rests with the church as a whole. Indeed, this is the Orthodox position. The whole church is the guardian of orthodoxy, not just the hierarchy.³⁵ However, it has been the normal practice for the laity to delegate this authority, knowingly or unknowingly, to the hierarchy. The bishop is the representative p. 140 of Christ in the Eucharistic gathering and is the symbol of the authority of the church. There is both a blessing and a problem in the delegation of the authority of the believers to the ecclesiastical leadership. The blessing is the historical continuity of the traditions and customs. The problem is that the life of the Holy Spirit who indwells all believers is not free to express the full dimensions of the Christian life. Form rather than personal experience inside the form comes to dominate the church.

Perhaps this is the central problem of tradition. It both preserves the past experiences and understandings of the people of God and does hamper the ongoing work of the Spirit in the believing community. The work of the Spirit in both preservation and freedom of expression must be kept in creative tension so that the voice of God in today's situation can be heard.

Thus the interpretation of the faith can and must move beyond the elements that have been handed down, because the church herself is a living body. The Orthodox Church has suffered a decline in attendance (but not necessarily membership) in a country like Greece because the church is not perceived to be relevant to the secularized society. The church is respected as a preserver of culture and for the witness of the church to the oppressors in the past, but is not thought to be relevant to today. It will be interesting to see if the same phenomena occurs in the former Soviet Union. The challenge is for the church to keep the Faith once delivered and make it speak to today's world. Some Orthodox maintain that the Byzantine liturgies are timeless and neither can nor should be changed. Other Orthodox speak of the need for liturgical reform to make the services more acceptable in terms of length.

There is some interest among the Orthodox in sorting out true tradition from what might be called human traditions. A hierarchy of tradition exists in the Orthodox Church. It is recognized that not everything from the past is of equal value. The elements that have unique authority are the Bible, the Creed, and the doctrinal definitions of the Ecumenical Councils.³⁶ The decrees of the Synod of Jassy (which ratified the *Confession of Peter Moghila*) and of the Synod of Jerusalem (which ratified the *Confession of Dositheus*) are not considered to be on the same level with the earlier statements. This is not because they are later and thus past the age of the Fathers, but because at the time they were composed Orthodoxy was in an uneven struggle with the West. Some theologians blame the problem on Moslem conquest and interference. It was not Orthodoxy at her best which

³⁴ Cf. A. A. Boglepov, 'Which Councils are Recognized as Ecumenical?', *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, VII (1963), 54–72. The concept of universal acceptance is particularly well handled by John Meyendorff, *Orthodox Church*, pp. 29–32.

³⁵ Zemov, *Eastern Christendom*, p. 231; Bulgakov, *Church* pp. 75–81.

³⁶ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, p. 205. The Creed referred to is what the West knows as the Nicene Creed which was drawn up at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325 AD). The Creed is commonly known among the Orthodox as the '*Pistevo*' (I believe) and is recited at every liturgy (without the Western addition of the *filioque*. For the complete text as used by the Orthodox Church, see *The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (London: Faith Press, n. d.). This edition has the official Greek text with an English translation.

met the challenges of the Reformation [p. 141](#) and Counter-Reformation.³⁷ This frank admission of foreign elements in the seventeenth century doctrinal statements may provide an opportunity for dialogue with Evangelicals. However, it should be realized that while the formulations of the seventeenth century are not in the fullest spirit of the Eastern Church, the Orthodox nevertheless attribute to them confessional status.³⁸

Her role as the true church and guardian of tradition lays upon Eastern Orthodoxy the duty to examine what has been handed down. Antiquity is not to be confused with truth. Not everything received from the past is to be accepted. One of the bishops at the Council of Carthage (257) reminded his fellows that ‘The Lord said, I am truth. He did not say, I am custom.’³⁹ Human opinions or mere custom must be separated from the authentic deposit of tradition. To do this means that the past must be critically reexamined. There is a growing awareness of the need for historical studies by Orthodox theologians.⁴⁰

CAN THE DEPOSIT OF TRUTH CHANGE?

Can tradition ever be modified? The answer is yes and no. Dealing with the no first, it is the position of the Orthodox Church that they have preserved the faith handed down. They believe that they have not tampered with the sacred deposit, having neither added anything, nor subtracted anything. Therefore, it is obvious that having preserved the true faith for nearly 2000 years, they will hardly consider tampering with it now.

Yet while there is, to say the least, a definite ring of finality in the above statements, it is also possible to answer the question in the affirmative. ‘Petrified mummy’ is a term of opprobrium that has been hurled at the Eastern Orthodox Church by Western theologians.⁴¹ However, the Orthodox do not regard their position to be static and unmoving in any way. To consider the Eastern Churches as lifeless and dead is to miss the wonder of Orthodoxy. There is a remarkable blend of unchanging authority and present experience. As Bratsiotis expresses it:

But if Holy Tradition is accepted as a source of faith, its immutability must be recognized as immutable. Moreover, in the Orthodox Church tradition is not regarded as a static factor—as many non-Orthodox people think—but as a dynamic one. Loyalty to tradition does not simply mean slavish attachment to the past and to external authority, but a living connection [p. 142](#) with the entire past experience of the Church.⁴²

According to Bratsiotis, the reasons for the Orthodox Church appearing to be static are purely historical, not organic. In light of the three centuries of Frankish and Venetian rule

³⁷ John Kaloghirou, ‘Sacred Tradition: Its sources and its Task in the Church’. *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, XI, 1 (Summer, 1965), 110–111.

³⁸ Cf. Eusebius A. P’Stephanou, *The Orthodox Church Militant* (New York: Greek Diocese of North and South America, 1950). P’Stephanou outlines what the Orthodox Church considers to be the ‘chief heresies that have endangered the purity of the Faith’. Included among others are Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism and Calvinism.

³⁹ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, p. 205.

⁴⁰ Cf. Theodore Stylianopoulos, ‘Historical Studies and Orthodox Theology or the Problem of History for Orthodoxy’, *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, XII, 2 (Fall, 1967), 394–419; also cf. Ware, *Orthodox Church*. pp. 205–206.

⁴¹ Bratsiotis, ‘Fundamental Principles’. p. 24.

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 25. Bratsiotis does not take credit for this concept but refers in a footnote to Georges Florovsky and Sergius Bulgakov.

and four centuries of Moslem domination, not to mention the more recent Bolshevik tyranny, the fact that the church still exists is somewhat miraculous. It is these historical reasons that account for a lack of theological advance.

But turning away from the problem of the past, can we discover anything within tradition that will unlock the door and give meaning to the expression, 'a living connection with the past'? Precisely how is this past experience relevant to our present situation? What is the link that joins the Orthodox Church of this day and age to the church of the Ecumenical Councils? The gap is bridged because the church, Christ's church, remains indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The presence of the Spirit thus signifies the true bond that unites the church to her past.

There is here more than just an unbroken *historic continuity*, which is indeed quite obvious. There is above all an ultimate *spiritual and ontological identity*, the same faith, the same spirit, the same ethos. And this constitutes the distinctive mark of Orthodox.⁴³

It is on this basis that one must understand tradition and indeed, the role of tradition in the church. Tradition is not something external that one investigates from the outside. Rather 'Tradition is far more than a set of abstract propositions; it is a life, a personal encounter with Christ in the Holy Spirit.'⁴⁴ Considering the characteristics of a personal encounter, one would expect a dynamic experience, an interaction between two living persons. In terms of this encounter tradition can thus be thought of as a living, growing relationship. Therefore, while the main body of truth does not change, the outward forms can change to conform to the new situations in which the church finds herself. It is incorrect to speak of doctrinal stagnation in the Orthodox Church. Such a concept is not in keeping with the nature of the Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky, considers new doctrinal formulation a distinct possibility.

Tradition, while inwardly changeless (for God does not change), is constantly assuming new forms, which supplement the old without superseding them. Orthodox often speak as if the period of doctrinal formulation were wholly at an end, yet this is not the case. Perhaps in our own day new Ecumenical Councils will meet, and tradition will be enriched by new statements of faith.⁴⁵

Here we return to the concept of the consensus of the church as the determiner of tradition. In Ware's statement we see the two answers, [p. 143](#) the no—Tradition does not change—and the yes—the church is able to enrich the deposit of Faith. This promise of openness can form the basis of inquiry into an exchange between the East and the West. The door is not closed for discussion.

Tradition plays a central role in the Orthodox East. But the very tradition that separates East and West may be found to be the bridge which will unite those who are called Christians. Perhaps there is a new role for tradition in this generation.

Dr. James Stamoolis is Dean of Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois USA. [p. 144](#)

⁴³ Georges Florovsky, 'The Ethos of the Orthodox Church', in *Orthodoxy: A Faith and Order Dialogue* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1960), p. 39.

⁴⁴ Ware. *Orthodox Church*, p. 206.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

IV

Scripture and Tradition in the Roman Catholic Church

George Vandervelde

INTRODUCTION

Caught in Reformation and Counter-Reformation polemics, 'tradition' in Protestant hands became largely a pejorative term. It was synonymous with 'human invention'. As such, it conflicts with divine revelation. In his 'Little Catechism', Calvin sets up this dilemma: 'Must we serve God according as He has commanded, or else as the traditions of men teach us?' The catechumen's prescribed answer was no: 'We must serve him as He has taught us by his Word and commandments, and not according to the commandments of men.'¹ 'Tradition' was tantamount to ecclesiastical abuse, indeed, usurpation, of authority. Accordingly, *sola scriptura* functions as a depth-charge under human tradition. Jesus' polemic against human customs that 'put to naught' the commandments of God becomes the charter of Protestant denigration of tradition.

The anti-traditional stance is hardly the whole story of the Reformers, of course. Yet, it is this polemic against tradition that has by and large coloured current Evangelical sensibilities, especially vis-à-vis the Roman Catholic Church. If truthful and constructive interrelations among Christians are to take place, each must portray the other's position accurately and empathetically. This essay represents an Evangelical attempt to analyze and assess the Roman Catholic approach to tradition.

THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

At its fourth session the Council of Trent adopted the following statement on Scripture and tradition:

The holy ecumenical and general Council of Trent ... has always this purpose in mind that in the Church errors be removed and the purity of the Gospel be preserved. This Gospel was promised of old through the prophets in the Sacred Scriptures; Our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, first promulgated it from His own lips; He in turn ordered that it be preached p. 145 through the apostles to all creatures as the source of all saving truth and rule of conduct. The Council clearly perceives that this truth and rule are contained in the written books and unwritten traditions which have come down to us, having been received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself or from the apostles by the dictation of the Holy Spirit, and have been transmitted as it were from hand to hand. Following, then, the example of the orthodox Fathers, it receives and venerates with the same sense of loyalty and reverence all the books of the Old and New Testaments—for God alone is the author of both—together with all the traditions concerning faith and morals, as coming from the

¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (London: James Clarke, 1959), pp. 239–240.

mouth of Christ or being inspired by the Holy Spirit and preserved in continuous succession in the Catholic Church (DS 1501).²

Two features of this decree stand out, its intention and its focus. The intent of this approach to tradition is identical to the burden of the Reformation—the removal of errors and the preservation of the purity of the gospel. At issue is the question, how can this best be realized? This intent is intrinsically linked to the focal point of tradition. It refers not to an assortment of extra-biblical traditions without cohesion or centre. On the contrary. The decree focuses on the gospel of Jesus Christ and the way in which it is alive in the church. On this centre the various elements of ‘tradition’ in relation to Scripture converge.³

As to the latter, the decree traces the historical unfolding of the gospel by implicitly equating ‘the Sacred Scriptures’ with the Old Testament. Tradition comes into focus as the decree describes how the ‘Gospel’ moves from Jesus (‘his own lips’ and commissioning apostles) to us. The preaching of the apostles is handed down in writing and orally. We have thus an ongoing traditioning process, The New Testament era is the initial time of traditioning, with the apostles playing the crucial role. They write down what was either handed down from Jesus or what was dictated by the Holy Spirit. This ‘dictation’ sounds, to Protestant ears, much like a reference to the ‘inspiration’ of Scripture. Yet, this is too quick an assimilation. Though not excluding ‘inscripturation’, this process refers to a broader activity of Holy Spirit. For when the decree subsequently defines ‘tradition’, it is said to derive from the mouth of Christ or the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Whether this is at work only in the original apostles is not clear.⁴ The important point to note is that tradition includes oral and written traditions in addition to the Old and New Testaments. Perhaps even ‘oral’ and ‘written’ suggests too restrictive a view of tradition. Ratzinger maintains p. 146 that Trent, and the Catholic tradition generally, does not restrict tradition to the ‘verbal’ realm. Tradition refers, not narrowly to the origin and handing on of teachings, but to the institution and continuation of the Christian *life*.⁵ Verbal tradition (whether written or oral) is a component of, and testimony to, this larger reality.

The question concerning the scope of the tradition and its relationship to Scripture leads to an underlying issue. It concerns the relation of *both* Scripture and tradition to *revelation*. This issue is commonly framed as the question concerning the ‘sources of revelation’. More precisely, the question is whether the Roman Catholic Church teaches that Scripture and tradition can be juxtaposed as the two sources of revelation.

The debate revolves around the interpretation of a key statement found in the Tridentine decree on tradition: ‘The Council clearly perceives that this truth and rule are contained in the written books and unwritten traditions which have come down to us ...’. From the classic Protestant viewpoint the case seems to be closed with the vend use of the word ‘and’. *Sola* brooks no complementary ‘and’. Trent obviously stands diametrically opposed to the Reformers’ insistence on the material sufficiency of Scripture (*sola*). Recently, however, prominent Catholic theologians have pointed out that this two-source

² ‘DS’ refers to the standard Denzinger-Schönmetzger numbering. The translation is that found in *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, ed J. Neuner and J. Dupuis (New York: Alba House, 1982).

³ For a helpful analysis of this decree, see Joseph Ratzinger, ‘On the Interpretation of the Tridentine Decree on Tradition’, in Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition* (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1966), pp. 50–68M.

⁴ See Ratzinger, pp. 56–57.

⁵ Ratzinger, *ibid.*, pp. 58–61. Ratzinger argues that this is the dominant strand of Tridentine thought.

interpretation of the ‘and’ is a misinterpretation because Trent chose ‘and’ precisely to jettison terminology that unmistakably taught a two-source theory.⁶ The original draft of the Tridentine document contained a ‘*partim-partim*’ description: the truth of the gospel is contained partly in written books, partly in unwritten traditions.

Placing Scripture and church traditions side by side and joining them with ‘and’ suggests two independent sources of revelation. Yet, since ‘and’ has been substituted for ‘*partim-partim*’ this opens the way for a different interpretation of Trent. Yves Congar, following Josef Geiselmann, insists that by choosing ‘and’ to replace the ‘partly-partly’ formulation, the Council deliberately chose to avoid deciding between the competing theologies advocated by distinct groups of Tridentine representatives.⁷ According to Congar, the Council decided only that Scripture and tradition are ‘the *two forms* under which the Gospel of Jesus Christ is communicated ...,’ without determining their interrelation.⁸ Others argue that Trent does indeed affirm tradition as a material source of dogma.⁹ p. 147

THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: DEI VERBUM

Which interpretation of Trent is correct, though important, is not decisive, since the Second Vatican Council clarifies the interrelationship of Scripture, tradition, and revelation. The process seems in some way to be a repeat of the Council of Trent. Again, the first working draft submitted to Vatican II by the preparatory Roman commission, clearly affirms a two-source conception. The schema’s title was ‘On the Sources of Revelation’ (*De Fontibus Revelationis*) and its first chapter was called ‘On the Two-Fold Source of Revelation’ (*De duplici fonte revelationis*). In a commentary—circulated at the Council—the anonymous author (Schillebeeckx) points out that this Scheme represents ‘only one definite theological school’. Further, he insists that the Council of Trent linked ‘source’ to the Good Tidings, so that there can be only one. By speaking of two sources of revelation, Schillebeeckx argues, this Schema conceives of revelation exclusively as ‘the communication of a set of conceptual truths’. At stake is the material sufficiency of Scripture: is the *content* of the faith handed on solely by way of Scripture or also by extra-biblical tradition? After four attempts to make the original text acceptable by revisions, it was finally put aside completely. An entirely new draft, entitled *Dei Verbum* (‘The Word of God’), was eventually adopted by Vatican II. Compared to its more scholastic predecessor, the new document may be called ‘evangelical’ in that the entire document breathes a passion for the gospel focus of Scripture and tradition-salvation in Jesus Christ (DV 1–7). This focus profoundly affects the presentation of Scripture and tradition. It precludes a plurality of ‘sources’ of revelation. Revelation in its fullness, according to the document, is found in Jesus Christ. Although acknowledging God’s revelation in creation and in the Old Testament era (DV 3, 14–16), *Dei Verbum* concentrates on the convergence of revelation in Jesus Christ. He is ‘the Mediator and at the same time the fullness of all

6

⁷ The *partim-partim* (‘partly’ in Scripture, ‘partly’ in the extra-Biblical tradition of the church) terminology appeared in the original schema but the Council replaced it with a simple *et*. Y. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay* (London: Burnes and Oates, 1966), p. 164.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Heiko, Augustinus Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought*. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), pp. 210–211, 286–289.

revelation' (DV 2, cf. 4). This revelation then is the gospel. It is this gospel that is handed down, which, in other words, is the subject of tradition.

As a result of this orientation to the revelation of the gospel in Jesus Christ, tradition is a very broad notion. It has little to do with tradition as 'information'—passed on alongside Scripture. Rather, tradition 'includes everything which contributes to the holiness of life, and the increase of faith of the People of God' (DV 8). Commissioned to preach and teach the gospel, the apostles were the pivotal agents of the traditioning process. This too is far more than passing on information. By preaching, teaching, and example, the apostles hand on all that they received from Christ, not only what they received 'from the lips of Christ', but also what they received 'from living with Him, and from what He did, or what they had learned through the prompting of the Holy Spirit' (DV 7). This traditioning commission, the church carries out, again, not only by her teaching, but in her *life* and *worship* (DV 8).

When *Dei Verbum* speaks of the [p. 148](#) development and growth of tradition, it does not refer to 'additional revelation'. In fact, this decree strongly emphasizes the 'completeness' and 'definitiveness' of revelation in Jesus Christ. It insists that we 'await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (Cf. [1 Tim. 6:14](#) and [Tit. 2:13](#))' (DV 4). The development seems to be understood primarily as a 'growth in understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down' (DV 8). But this must not be understood as a cerebral process. Because it is the good news that is at stake, the traditioning process can be described as the church's responsibility 'to keep the gospel forever whole and alive within the Church ...' (DV 7).

Given this broad and vibrant sense of tradition, what is the nature and role of Scripture?¹⁰ As part of the original task of handing on the gospel, *Dei Verbum* ascribes a high status to the Scriptures. They are said to be canonical in their entirety and in all their parts, 'because having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. [Jn. 20:31](#); [2 Tim. 3:16](#); [2 Pet. 1:19-21](#); [3:15-16](#)) they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church' (DV 11). In keeping with this view of God's activity, the Vatican decree holds to a form of the inerrancy of the Scriptures: 'Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted to put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation' (*ibid.*). The decree therefore maintains that the Scriptures not only 'contain the word of God' but that they 'really are the word of God' (DV 24).

This high view of Scripture is reinforced by the efficacy Vatican II ascribes to it and the use of Scripture that it enjoins upon the faithful and their leaders. The Christian religion and the preaching of the church 'must be nourished and ruled by sacred Scripture'. In giving grounds for this imperative the decree poignantly extols the power of the Scriptures:

For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and perennial source of spiritual life. Consequently, these words are perfectly applicable to sacred Scripture: 'For the word of God is living and efficient' ([Heb. 4:12](#)) and is 'able to build up and give the inheritance among all the sanctified' ([Acts 20:32](#); cf. [1 Th. 2:13](#)) (DV 21).

Accordingly, 'the study of the sacred page is the soul of sacred theology' (DV 24).

¹⁰ In the Roman Catholic Tradition, Scripture includes of course the Apocrypha.

Vatican II clearly ascribes preeminent status to Scripture. The question that remains is how Scripture functions in relation to tradition. *Dei Verbum* teaches that ‘a close connection and communication exists between Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end’ (*in unum quodammodo coalescunt et in eundem finem tendunt*). The notion of ‘connection and communication’ suggests that the relationship is not a one-way street but a form of interaction. The Scriptures are interpreted within the context of the ‘living tradition’ of the church. Moreover, the official ‘traditor’, the church, ‘carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God’ (DV 12). Sacred tradition, sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the church make up a kind of tripod. They are joined in such a way that ‘one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls’ (DV 10).

What, more precisely, is the relative status of each element of this tripod? As to Scripture and tradition, they are often juxtaposed in such a way as to suggest parity. This becomes especially evident when the Council stresses the role of the apostle’s successors in handing on the inscripturated word of God ‘in its full purity’. Being led by God’s Spirit, these successors ‘can in their preaching preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known’. Given this teaching office of the church, the decree concludes that ‘it is not from sacred Scripture alone (*non per solam Sacram Scripturam*) that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed’ (DV 9). This could be interpreted as affirming a two-source theory. It must be kept in mind, however, that the context is the *appropriation* of the gospel. Accordingly, the passage denies *sola scriptura* only with respect to the *certainty* of faith.¹¹ The next section, dealing with the relation of tradition and Scripture, again does not differentiate between their relative status. ‘Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture’ are said to form ‘one sacred deposit of the word of God’. Here ‘the word of God’ explicitly includes both that which is written and that which is handed down (*verbum Dei scriptum vel traditum*) (DV 10).

The Council’s understanding of the relationship of Scripture and tradition is difficult to determine precisely. There are strands of *Dei Verbum* that go beyond the parity we have noted and suggest the practical supremacy of tradition, namely in the role assigned to the living *traditor*, the teaching authority of the church. The section that speaks of Scripture and tradition forming one sacred deposit proceeds in the very next paragraph to reiterate the role of the *magisterium*: ‘The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ’ (DV 10). This raises the question concerning the final norm. If the role of authentic interpretation is relegated exclusively to one agency, it can in practice usurp the authority of the word. The constitution itself seems aware, and wary, of this possibility. It adds, ‘This teaching office *is not above the word of God, but serves it*, teaching what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit; it draws from this deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed’ (DV 10; emphasis added). This would be a far more effective antidote to the supremacy of tradition, if the ‘word of God’ clearly referred to the Scriptures. As we have seen, however, in this context it includes extra-biblical traditions, whether written or unwritten.

¹¹ See the discussion of this point by G. C. Berkouwer in *Nabetrachting op het Concilie* (Kampen: Kok, 1968), pp. 114–121.

Though this lack of clarity remains a serious problem, it is important to listen to mitigating statements. For one thing, even though the statement just cited does not clearly commit the teaching office to serving the *Scriptures*, it is significant that the teaching authority is meant to be entirely *receptive*. The posture of the church is to be that of listener, guardian. The criterion for ‘authentic’ interpretation lies beyond, comes from beyond, the presently interpreting church. Moreover, some statements ascribe functional primacy to the Scriptures. In fact, the very passage that declares that ‘the Scriptures together with sacred tradition’ is ‘the supreme rule of faith’ seems to tip the scales in favour of Scripture. It insists that all preaching must not only be nourished, but be ‘ruled by sacred Scripture’ (DV 21). It is hard to imagine that official teaching would not be subject to this same imperative. And certainly the magnificent description of the excellency and efficacy of Scriptures (see above) that follows the imperative is matched by no parallel statements in praise of tradition. The preeminence status ascribed to Scripture is corroborated in a later statement regarding the role of Scripture in the church: ‘The Bride of the incarnate Word, and the Pupil of the Holy Spirit, the Church is concerned to move ahead daily toward a deeper understanding of the sacred Scriptures so that she may unceasingly feed her sons with the divine words’ (DV 23).

While such clarion affirmations of the pivotal function of Scriptures are highly significant, they can hold full sway only if the Scriptures are recognized as the final court of appeal for the community of Christ. We will return to that later.

DETERMINATIVE TRADITION

The relative status of Scripture and tradition is not resolved by statements on the subject. A church, of whatever tradition, may declare allegiance to the inerrancy and supremacy of Scripture, yet in practice negate the authority of Scripture by assumptions that derive from a hallowed tradition. Thus the church in practice would lord it over the Scriptures. Accordingly, even though the Second Vatican Council clearly moves away from a two-source hypothesis regarding revelation, and even if it clearly assigned primacy to Scripture over tradition, the question of the practical outworking of this in the life and teaching of the church would still be decisive for an assessment of the Roman Catholic view of tradition. An obvious point of contention **P. 151** would then be the most recent dogmas regarding Mary. For if these dogmas are not found in the Scriptures, do they depend *de facto* on the idea of two sources of revelation? The bull *Ineffabilis Deus* of 1854 which solemnly promulgates as dogma the immaculate conception of Mary appeals massively to tradition as a ground for this teaching. It appeals to tradition in various ways: the church, since it is always taught by the Holy Spirit, is the ground and pillar of truth; this doctrine was given to the church by God; was contained in the deposit of revelation from of old; and was deeply imbedded in the consciousness of believers everywhere¹². As to Scripture, the Bull appeals to statements regarding Mary’s virtue and purity.¹³ Further, it mentions the extensive investigation that was undertaken within the contemporary church to determine the mind of the bishops and cardinals and the sense of the faithful.¹⁴

A century later, Pope Pius XII declared the bodily assumption of Mary to be dogma (*Munificentissimus Deus*, 1950). It is presented in part as a logical extension of the dogma

¹² *Papal Teachings: Our Lady* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1961), pp. 62–63, 69–72, 77–78; hereafter *Our Lady*.

¹³ *Our Lady*, pp. 71–74.

¹⁴ *Our Lady*, pp. 78–79.

of 1854. This document contains a more extensive and systematic presentation of the grounds for this belief than does its predecessor. Among them one finds the appeal to the consciousness of the faithful, the witness of the liturgy in East and West, the preaching of the Church Fathers, and the teaching of theologians. The scriptural basis is subsumed under the teaching of the theologians. They are said to reply on Scripture as their ultimate foundation. The substance of the argument involves her intimate relationship with Jesus. Accordingly, it is almost impossible that she would subsequently be separated bodily from him (par. 38); by way of inference the documents moves from what is almost impossible to what *must* have happened.¹⁵ An additional argument appeals to the promise in [Genesis 3](#) regarding the seed of the woman. This promise demands Mary's total victory over death; bodily assumption is that victory¹⁶. It may be well to quote the dogmatic foundation for this teaching in full:

Since the Universal Church, within which dwells the Spirit of Truth who infallibly directs it towards an ever more perfect knowledge of the revealed truths, has expressed its own belief many times over the course of the centuries and since the Bishops of the entire world are almost unanimously petitioning that the truth of the bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven should be defined as a dogma of divine and Catholic faith—this truth which is based on the Sacred Writings, which is thoroughly rooted in the minds of the faithful, which has been approved in ecclesiastical worship from the most remote times, which is completely in harmony with the other revealed truths, and which has been expounded and explained magnificently in the work, the science, and the wisdom of the theologians—We believe that the moment appointed in the plan of divine providence for the [p. 152](#) solemn proclamation of this outstanding privilege of the Virgin Mary has already arrived.¹⁷

Although Scripture plays an obvious role in the declaration of this dogma, it is hard to escape the conclusion that tradition and the teaching office are supreme and decisive. Furthermore, even the discussion of these dogmas is highly problematic. Both bulls surround these dogmas with dire warnings. Regarding the declaration of the Immaculate Conception: 'If, therefore, any persons shall dare to think—which God forbid—otherwise than has been defined by us, let them clearly know that they stand condemned by their own judgment, that they have made shipwreck of their faith and fallen from the unity of the Church.' Similarly, concerning the dogma of the Bodily Assumption: 'Wherefore, if anyone—which God forbid—should willfully dare to deny or call in doubt what has been defined by us, let him know that he certainly has abandoned the divine and Catholic faith.'

Such quasi anathemas seem to undermine statements that ascribe primacy to the Scriptures. For here tradition appears to be frozen and thereby no longer subject to continual scrutiny as to the conformity of such dogmas to the Scriptures. That this problem is not imaginary is confirmed by the teaching of the First Vatican Council on the finality of magisterial interpretation:

In matters of faith and morals, affecting the building up of Christian doctrine, that is to be held as the true sense of Holy Scripture which Holy Mother the Church has held and holds, to whom it belongs to judge of the true sense and interpretation of Holy Scriptures.

¹⁵ *Our Lady*, p. 317.

¹⁶ *Our Lady*, p. 319.

¹⁷ *Our Lady*, pp. 318–319.

Therefore, no one is allowed to interpret the same Sacred Scripture contrary to this sense, or contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers (DS 3007).¹⁸

If Vatican II had clearly assigned primacy to the Scriptures, one could assume that this statement by Vatican I would in effect have been superseded. Given the remaining ambiguity on this score in the Vatican II texts, Evangelical concerns will not be wholly satisfied unless the significance of Vatican II is explained in terms of the contrary texts of Vatican I.

TRADITION AND CRITERIA

Citing such statements may create the impression that only the Roman Catholic church is prone to the danger of allowing tradition to dominate Scripture. That is itself a dangerous illusion. Whether acknowledged or not, every church community has an operative tradition that guides it in interpreting the Scriptures. Moreover, whether formal or informal, explicit or implicit, almost every church communion has some form of teaching authority, some way of establishing a number of issues to be settled and binding. In some communities these may be predominantly practical issues, such as abstinence from alcohol, pacifism, or women's ordination. In other communities the **P. 153** issues may be predominantly doctrinal, such as teaching on baptism (infant or believer's), the divinity of Christ, and the scope of salvation. In each of these communities issues such as these are not simply open questions. Not every 'opinion' on these matters has equal status within a particular community. The issue therefore is not whether tradition—and even some form of teaching authority—plays a role. The question is rather in what way the Scriptures are allowed to play the role of critical interlocutor of all our traditions. The questions raised with respect to the role of tradition in the Roman Catholic Church do not let any 'tradition' off the hook.

Even if one accepts the organic interrelation between revelation, Scripture, and tradition, and thus rejects every simplistic *sola Scriptura* appeal that wrenches the written word from its living matrix of revelation and tradition, the Scripture must be accorded its unique 'over-against' role.¹⁹ This is crucial, for this status of Scripture is the textual corollary of the fact that, by virtue of its transcendence and holiness, God's, grace is not at our disposal.²⁰ God p. revelation is, indeed, given into our hands and is meant to be handed on. Yet, to ensure that it is *God's* revelation that is handed on, a norm, a criterion is needed. James B. Torrance raises the critical question in this regard: 'In what way does Revelation come to us through tradition? There are right ways and wrong ways of interpreting this, and this is where the ecumenical debate lies today.'²¹ He insists that 'it is one thing to say that the Church is the sphere of the Spirit of truth ("... who leads us into all truth"), or to say that the Church is possessed by the Spirit. It is another to say that the Church

¹⁸ This issue rises to prominence once more with the promulgation of Pope John Paul II's recent Encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*. Here the task assigned to theologians is by and large that of loyally supporting and elaborating the teachings of the church.

¹⁹ See Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) p. 90, here 'foil'; 'over-against' is a literal translation from the Dutch.

²⁰ Cf. Siegfried Wiederhofer, 'Grundprobleme des theologischen Traditionsbegriffs', *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 112 (1990): 20–21.

²¹ James B. Torrance, 'Authority, Scripture and Tradition', *Evangelical Quarterly* 87 (1987): 246.

possesses the Spirit and therefore possesses the truth in herself.’²² Presumably, no one in the Roman Catholic tradition would make such claims. The real question is what are the best safeguards against acting as if the church were the possessor.

THE ‘OVER-AGAINST’ OF SCRIPTURE

On this issue, Matthias Handel’s massive study of the role of Scripture in Faith and Order documents provides some helpful insights. He emphasizes that the church stands first of all in a ‘hearing and receiving tradition’. If the church aspires to an appropriate reception of tradition, it must open itself ever anew to the witness of Scripture.²³ This means **P. 154** that the church constantly places itself under the judgement of Scripture.

The heirs of the Reformation must themselves always be prepared to face the ‘radical question’ it asks Rome. Yves Congar formulates this question as follows: ‘Does the Catholic Church not identify itself with the norm, situating it within itself? Consequently, it has no confrontation, nor Lord, no dialogue except with itself.’²⁴ In the same vein, K. E. Skydsgaard argues for the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between the Word of God and tradition, understood as human answer: ‘The history of the Church has shown that they must necessarily be carefully distinguished, otherwise the Church would become its own legislator, and finally its own Lord.’²⁵ The over-against of the Word of God, which the supremacy of the canon is meant to maintain, takes aim at subjectivism of whatever type. From the point of view of the Reformers, the Roman Church appears to fall into a collective subjectivism: the church as a whole led by the official teaching office, determines the truth—witness the decisions of 1854 and 1950 regarding Mary. From the Catholic point of view, Luther appears to fall into an individualistic subjectivism: a solitary individual dares to claim that his interpretation is the true interpretation of the Scriptures—witness the ongoing splitting of the church.²⁶

It is striking that even in literary theory the integrity and primacy of the text needs to be asserted against its post-modern dissolution. Walter A. Davis, for example, insists

that it is still possible to say (for example), that Shakespeare measures me rather than the other way around; that the great writers offer us the possibility of a humanity we can attain only through the most strenuous efforts of self over-coming: and that it is a good thing to be ‘the humble servant of the text’ (rather than ‘the force that brings the text into being’) when the text has the power to lead us beyond the narrow range of our self-serving beliefs and our self-protective emotions.²⁷

²² *Ibid.*, p. 247.

²³ Matthias Haudel, *Die Babel und die Einheit der Kirchen: Eine Untersuchung der Studien von ‘Glauben und Kirchenverfassung’* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), p. 378; cf. 391. The phrase ‘hörende und empfangende Tradition’ is that of Anton Houtepen. I have access only to the English edition: ‘Reception, Tradition, Communion’, in Max Thurian, *Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva, WCC, 1983), p. 150.

²⁴ Yves Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, tr. David Smith (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 33.

²⁵ K. E. Skydsgaard, ‘Tradition as an Issue in Contemporary Theology’, in *The Old and the New in the Church* (London: SCM, 1961), pp. 33–34.

²⁶ Joseph Lortz describes the Protestant approach as ‘ein starker Dogmatismus im Subjektivismus ein subjektiver Dogmatismus.’ Cited in Heiko Oberman, *Dawn of the Reformation*, p. 285, n. 57.

²⁷ Walter A. Davis, ‘Offending the Profession (After Peter Handke)’, *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1984): 716–717.

If it is crucial to maintain the givenness, primacy, and normativity of the text in the case of the literary greats of our culture, it is a *fortiori* true of a text that the church has received as canon, as rule and norm for her faith.

One can argue that *Dei Verbum* itself demands a clearer affirmation of the primacy of Scripture. For it clearly confesses the excellency and effectiveness of the Scriptures, ascribes to tradition the role of handing on the gospel in its purity, and assigns to the *magisterium* the task of authentically interpreting *the Scriptures*. But then the latter cannot p. 155 be placed on a par with tradition. It cannot simply be conjoined with tradition as the 'supreme rule'. Without a clear affirmation of the Scripture as supreme criterion, there is no defence against tradition becoming more than interpretive, more than receptive. Without the over-against of the Scriptures the church has no adequate antidote to the illusion that it is exempt from the call of *semper reformanda*.

To insist on a clear affirmation of and submission to the primacy of Scripture as norm is not necessarily to revert to a simplistic pitting of Scripture against tradition. As indicated earlier, scriptural authority does not function without interpretation, and interpretation takes place within a tradition. But if, as we confess, the Scriptures and their meaning is not at our disposal, the church needs to submit constantly to the correction and the reproof of these writings.

In conclusion, it is important to recognize the foundational issue at stake in the Scripture-tradition relation. To press home the urgency of acknowledging the primacy of the Scripture as supreme norm readily conjures up the notion of a 'court of appeal', often the highest court of appeal. This metaphor, of course, immediately places us in a polemical, quasi-judicial setting. Here debate, controversy, adversaries, argument, and judgement are the stock in trade. This is neither surprising, nor necessarily illegitimate. From earliest times the church was embroiled in debate, for example, over the nature(s) of Christ, the trinity, grace and free will. In the midst of subsequent schisms, debate within the broken church seems to become the order of the day. Little wonder, then, that questions concerning valid sources of authority and legitimate courts of appeal themselves generate heated debate.

Yet, we need to step back from these associations and place the issue of 'authority' in a larger context. The *Scriptura* which the Reformers prefixed with *sola* testify to authority in a different vein. They speak of one who, on completing his redemptive mission, declares that all authority is given to him. This is crucial. It means that the source and seat of authority is Christ. Further, that authority connects his completed and his continuing mission: go and make disciples. In other words, the heart of authority resides, not first of all in a book, but in a person. That person continues to be on a mission. The living *locus* of his authority, therefore, is the mission field (which lies in our own back-yards; or rather, our own front-yards). The theological discussion table is only a derivative *locus*.

The authority about which the church is primarily concerned, then, is that of Christ. Though that point seems obvious, it has momentous implications for our discussion. For the question at stake is not first of all, 'What final source of authority do we *use*?' But, 'How is the unique authority of the Author of life and new life properly honoured and fostered among God's people?' This is the context that lends the issue of the authority of Scripture and the role of tradition their critical significance.

Biblical authority is crucial for the sake of, in the service of, Christ's continuing mission authority. This p. 156 inextricable relationship and irreversible priority became all the more pointed in that the Scriptures do not mediate Christ's authority as a bridge between the teachings of a long dead founder and subsequent generations of followers. The claim to 'all authority' is followed by the assurance of presence: 'I will be with you....' The Reformation was not a debate concerning two disparate principles—one 'formal', the

other ‘material’—namely, *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*. Rather the conflicting views captured in these slogans converge in the *sola gratia* which is found only in Christ. ‘When the Reformation spoke of the “sola Scriptura”, it meant to keep alive the question concerning the bond with the Lord through the Gospel.’²⁸ It is his authoritative and healing presence in his mission that is at stake. The issues revolve around the presence and revelation of Christ today.²⁹ The question is, how does Christ ‘choose to reveal himself’ ([Mt. 11:27](#)) today, to whom, and how can we know? The burden of the Reformation concerns the manner and means of Christ’s presence *in and through tradition*.³⁰

The Evangelical concern about the Roman Catholic view and role of tradition is that the Scripture is not given sufficiently free reign to clear the pathway to Christ of all human construction that become instructions. Fortunately, these are not simply Evangelical questions to an alien tradition. In these concerns the Evangelical theologian is joined by his Roman Catholic counterpart.³¹

Dr. George Vanderwelde is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Institute for Christian Studies Toronto and also serves on the faculty of Wycliffe College Toronto. He is President of the North America Academy of Ecumenists. [p. 157](#)

V

Scripture and Tradition in Reformation Thought

Gerald Bray

It was inevitable that the Reformation would raise the question of tradition and its rôle in the life of the church. Any challenge to the existing order of things starts from the assumption that something must be wrong with it, and the defenders of the *status quo* usually find it all too easy to reply that the existing order must not be tampered with

²⁸ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 100. (my translation; the English translation has rendered the Dutch ‘verbondenheid’ as ‘commitment to the Lord’, which unduly emphasizes the faith side of this bond.

²⁹ Josph Ratzinger is entirely right, therefore, when he points out that we cannot deal with Scripture and tradition as such, but must go ‘behind’ them to the overarching reality of revelation, the ‘inner source, ... the living word of God from which scripture and tradition spring and without which their significance for faith cannot be understood’ (Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition*, p. 34).

³⁰ See Ratzinger’s formulation: ‘The question of the way in which the word of revelation uttered in Christ remains present in history and reaches men is one of the fundamental questions which split western Christendom in the age of the Reformation’ (*ibid.*, p. 26).

³¹ See, e.g., Enzo Bianchi, ‘The Centrality of the Word of God’, in *The Reception of Vatican II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, *et al.* (Washington, D.C.; The Catholic University of America Press, 1987), pp. 115–136.

because ‘things have always been done this way’. It is a phenomenon which repeats itself every time something new is proposed, and there will always be those who will leap to the defence of ‘tradition’ in order to thwart the process of change. But the common perception that in the sixteenth-century Reformation the Papal party defended tradition while the Reformers rejected it, is much too simplistic. In reality, both (or all) sides in the debate were forced to confront a corrupt state of affairs and reform it by developing an understanding of what tradition was and how it should be used in the life of the church.

What became the Roman Catholic Church answered this question in one way, while Luther and his imitators answered it in others. Among the Protestants, as the Reformers came to be called, two opposing tendencies were evident from the beginning. On the one hand there were the ‘conservatives’ who basically wanted to purify the church according to Scripture, but who believed that that could be done quite adequately with only minimal violence to existing practices and customs. On the other hand there were the ‘radicals’, who thought that *all* traditions were by definition corruptions, and ought to be discarded in favour of a church order based exclusively on the clear testimony of Scripture.

These two tendencies became apparent almost immediately, when the radicals challenged the practice of infant baptism, which they believed was the result of a ‘corrupt following of the Apostles’.¹ Could this ancient and universal practice be defended from the New Testament [p. 158](#) alone? A movement which wanted its reforms to be consonant with the teaching of Holy Scripture soon discovered that answers to a question like that would not easily be found, and that different conclusions would produce further splits within an already fractured church. Before long, the ‘conservatives’ were asking themselves whether it was really necessary, or even possible, to construct church order and discipline exclusively from the text of Scripture. Was not some deference to tradition, however minimal or unacknowledged, essential if decency and order were to be preserved? Once this was admitted, the ‘conservatives’ had to confront the ‘radicals’ with an understanding of tradition which allowed for it within a doctrinal framework based on the fundamental principle of *sola Scriptura*.

PRE REFORMATION

For whatever else may be said of it, there is no doubt that *sola Scriptura* (‘Scripture alone’) was, and has remained, one of the most basic beliefs of the Reformation. The notion can be traced back to John Wycliffe (d. 1384), who expounded it in his book *De veritate Sacrae Scripturae* (1378). Wycliffe was writing at a time when the traditional authority of the Papacy was receiving a new blow from the Great Schism (1378–1417), and it is surely not accidental that the ecumenical condemnation of his writings coincided with the healing of that division at the Council of Constance.²

Wycliffe upheld the unique authority of Scripture on the ground that because it is the Word of God, it must reflect the Divine Mind. In this respect, he belonged to the realist school of medieval philosophy, in contrast to Luther, who saw himself as the inheritor of the nominalist tradition of William of Ockham. Because of Scripture’s character, claimed Wycliffe, it possessed an inherent perfection which was denied to any human agent, whether it be Pope, Council or priest. Wycliffe’s views about the Bible were substantially orthodox and would probably have caused less of a sensation had they not been linked to

¹ The actual phrase comes from Article XXV of the Church of England, where it was applied to the five non-Gospel sacraments.

² Wycliffe had already been condemned several times in England. See e.g. A. Kenny, *Wycliffe*, OUP, Oxford, 1985.

a reinterpretation of church doctrine which went far beyond condemning the excessive claims of the late medieval Papacy. For Wycliffe believed that Scripture demonstrated that the doctrine of transubstantiation, which had been formally adopted at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, after about 350 years of semi-official acceptance, was contrary to the plain teaching of the biblical text. As he argued the matter, when Jesus said: 'This is my body' he could not possibly have meant: 'This body is my body', since that would be a nonsense. He must have meant: 'This bread is my body'. It was thus clear to him that the eucharistic bread remained after consecration every bit as much as it had been before, and there was therefore no 'miracle of the altar', as most of the more enthusiastic medieval churchgoers believed.

Wycliffe's repudiation of such an important doctrine got him into trouble even with many who were prepared to [p. 159](#) support his attacks on the Papacy. The scenario is a familiar one. An academic, speaking philosophical language, challenged a belief dear to the hearts of a large and influential section of the laity. The result was that Wycliffe lost the support of the very elements he most needed to win if his cause were to succeed. The whole episode provides an interesting foretaste of what would happen again in the sixteenth century, when there would be many who had little time for Papal claims, but who did not want the substance of 'Catholic doctrine' to be altered in any way, and so ended up as opponents of a movement which they had initially supported.

REFORMATION

Luther inherited Wycliffe's doctrine of *sola Scripture* and made it a watchword of his Reformation, though the intellectual and spiritual climate were by then very different. In Luther's world, the main appeal of Scripture was its antiquity. Of course, Luther also regarded it as the Word of God, but his approach to that aspect of the matter was far more pragmatic (we might even say 'scholarly') than Wycliffe's had been. For example, Luther regarded the limits of the canon of Scripture as a humanly imposed tradition, and felt free to doubt the church's accepted practice. His inclination to reject a book like James was not followed by his disciples, but it does show how 'liberal' Luther could be with his material.

The antiquity of the text appealed to the humanist culture to which Luther spoke, because it corresponded to one of its most cherished assumptions. This was that the sources of Christian teaching were pure, and had been corrupted in the course of time. Wycliffe would have understood that argument, but whereas he saw the corruption as having begun in relatively recent times (in the twelfth century, for all practical purposes), Luther and his followers came to see it as having started much earlier. Indeed, it eventually became an issue as to whether there had ever been a pure church, even in New Testament times! In this intellectual climate, tradition (and the process of its corruption) took on a whole new meaning and importance.

In the pre-Reformation Western Church, tradition had long referred to those unwritten practices and beliefs which had been handed down (in principle) from apostolic time. There were innumerable habits and customs which Christians employed, which they regarded as appropriate manifestations of their faith, but which were not actually prescribed in Holy Writ.³ When some of them were challenged, the answer was relatively straightforward—such practices had always existed in the church and been understood as promoting, not as hindering, the witness of the gospel.

³ Tertullian (fl. c. 196-c. 212) provides an interesting list of them in *De corona* 3. On the subject of baptism, for instance, he records that there was a threefold immersion, followed by a tasting of a mixture of milk and honey, after which the newly baptised person would refrain from washing for a week!

The most serious attack on this ancient tradition occurred during the iconoclastic controversies (726–842), p. 160 when a group of Byzantine puritan *avant la lettre* denounced the presence of images in churches. The Seventh Ecumenical Council, held at Nicaea in 787, condemned this position, which it perceived to be Judaistic, and proclaimed that the traditional veneration of images was not only permissible, it was necessary if Christ were to be truly worshipped as the incarnate Son of God.⁴

From the Protestant point of view, it was this passage from the permissible to the essential which marks the vital turning-point. There had long been a tendency to condemn certain traditional practices as 'Judaistic'; one thinks for example of the quartodeciman celebration of Easter in the second century, or the use of azymes (unleavened bread) in the eucharist, which was denounced at the Council in *Trullo* in 692. But the imposition of icons as a necessary ingredient in worship marked a further shift from negative condemnation of one tradition to positive insistence on another. It is perhaps not surprising that the decisions of this Council were never fully implemented in the West, nor that they have been almost universally repudiated by even the most historically conservative Protestants.

COUNTER REFORMATION

At the time of the Reformation, supporters of the Roman position clung to this ancient understanding of tradition, which is formally enshrined in the first decree of the Fourth Session of the Council of Trent (8 April 1546):

'The council clearly perceives that this truth (i.e. the Gospel) and rule are contained in written books and in unwritten traditions which were received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or else have come down to us, handed on as it were from the Apostles themselves at the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.'⁵

Neither Luther nor most of the early Reformers would have objected to the retention of primitive traditions which clearly helped to illuminate the gospel, though they would have been unhappy with the statement that the traditions concerned had been given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, since there was nothing in Scripture to indicate this. They regarded all such practices as ultimately subject to the control of p. 161 Scripture, which provided the basis on which their meaning was to be understood.⁶ They would also have wanted to say that traditions of this kind were essentially *adiaphora* ('things indifferent'),

⁴ The three anathemas of the Council put the matter very succinctly. These read:

1. if anyone does not confess that Christ our God can be represented in his humanity, let him be anathema.
2. If anyone does not accept representation in art of evangelical scenes, let him be anathema.
3. If anyone does not salute such representations as standing for the Lord and his saints, let him be anathema.

Text and translation in N. P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Georgetown UP, Washington, 1990, Vol. 1, p. 137.

⁵ ... (synodus) perspicuensque, hanc veritatem et disciplinam contineri in libris scriptis et sine scripto traditionibus, quae ab ipsius Christi ore ab apostolis acceptae, aut ab ipsis Apostolis Spiritu Sancto dictante quasi per manus traditae ad nos usque pervenerunt.... Text and translation in N. P. Tanner, *op cit.* Vol. 2, p. 663. It is interesting to note in passing that the decree then goes on to list the canonical books of Scripture, the first time that an Ecumenical Council had done so.

⁶ For a discussion of this point, see P. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1966, pp. 3–8.

which might be helpful or even desirable, but which could not be made compulsory. The most succinct and readily available statement of this position is the one which Archbishop Thomas Cranmer prefaced to the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, and which has continued to be included in all subsequent editions and revisions of that Book. It is the piece entitled: Of ceremonies, why some be abolished and some retained, and its most significant points are as follows:

The ceremonies (i.e. traditions) of the Church may be divided into three distinct types. Some were devised with 'godly intent and purpose', but later became corrupted. They ought to be restored to their original purity, or if that is impossible, replaced. Others 'entered into the Church by indiscreet devotion, and such a zeal as was without knowledge'. These were 'winked at in the beginning' and subsequently grew into major abuses. Ceremonies of this kind ought to be abolished. Lastly, there are ceremonies which, although they were devised by man, were intended to promote the decent order of the Church and continue to perform that function. These ceremonies ought to be retained and used as regularly as possible, not because it is a sin to omit them, but because it is a Scriptural command that all things be done decently and in order.

THE ENGLISH REFORMATION

The number of ceremonies in the pre-Reformation Church had become grossly inflated, to the point where keeping them all had become an impossible burden. It was therefore necessary to pare them down, so that those which were to be retained might fulfil their purpose more effectively.

On the second point, it is interesting to note that Thomas Cranmer's argument consisted of three fundamental aspects. First he appealed to St Augustine, who had also complained of an excess of ceremonial in his own time. This shows that for Cranmer, the Patristic tradition retained its authority as a source for Christian doctrine and worship. Second, Cranmer claimed that had Augustine been alive in the sixteenth century, he would have supported the Reformation. This (very common) assertion shows that the Reformers believed that they were the true inheritors of the ancient Fathers, as well as of the New Testament Church. Third, Cranmer regarded the excess of ceremonial as evidence of a Judaizing tendency, a remark which, as we have already seen, had been common to would-be reformers of tradition from ancient times onwards.

Cranmer's views, aided by the judicious and principled way in which he expressed them, would doubtless have commanded the assent of Luther, had he still been alive, and were not objected to by Calvin as far as we know. However, it has to be recorded that as the Reformation developed a puritanical strain, it was often on precisely these matters of principle that divisions arose. The clearest example of this is [p. 162](#) provided by the English situation, where the more zealous found traces of 'Popery' in many ancient practices of the church which could not claim express scriptural support. Cranmer himself was well aware of this, and devoted the middle section of his preface to answering his critics on both the right and the left. But such was the dynamic of the Reformation that a generation later Richard Hooker was obliged to defend the (reformed) Church of England against its Puritan detractors, by pointing out that their version of sola Scriptura was actually too narrow to be called scriptural!⁷

MARTIN LUTHER

⁷ R. Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, III.

When Luther denounced ‘tradition’, which he often did with his characteristic vehemence, he was normally talking about something quite different from what the Council of Trent had in mind. Luther took his cue from Jesus’ own condemnation of the Pharisees, who were accused of ‘teaching as doctrine the commandments of men’ ([Mt. 15:9](#)). What this meant to him was that the medieval church, like the Pharisees of old, were insisting on a number of ritual observances and other pious practices which, although they were meant to further the message of salvation, in practice obscured and even denied it. Instead of the free grace of the gospel, proclaimed in the New Testament, Christians were being burdened with the demands of canon law (among them, for example, compulsory clerical celibacy), which had nothing to do with redemption but which, in the eyes of the contemporary church, were treated as being of equal, and sometimes as of greater, importance than the cardinal doctrine of justification by faith. To quote Luther:

Examine the canons, and you will see that the transgression of the traditions of the Pope are punished with far greater severity than transgressions of the Law of God ... The Pope not only did away with divinely instituted matrimony, but he sullied it outright, as though it were an unholy kind of life and were displeasing to God.

From the Sacrament of the Eucharist the Pope has not only removed the cup and—contrary to what is right—taken it away from the Church; but he has changed Christ’s testament into a sacrifice and a work that is done for profit.⁸

Generations of Catholic apologists, from the sixteenth century onwards, have questioned this interpretation of the church’s teaching, and in a formal sense, they have doubtless been right to do so. Clerical celibacy, for example, has never been defended *iure divino* as essential to salvation; it was, and is, officially no more than a discipline imposed on the ordained ministry. Likewise, communion in one kind was not intended to signify any change in doctrine; Catholic apologists have always been at pains to point out that the recipient in one kind receives the fulness of the body and blood of Christ. But clerical celibacy is a discipline which allows of few if [p. 163](#) any real exceptions, and those subjected to it might well feel that too much is being asked of them. Similarly, communion in one kind (for the laity only) is very difficult to justify, and flies in the face of obvious New Testament practice. It may be advantageous in certain situations (e.g. communion of the sick), but it is hard to see why it should be made compulsory for everyone all the time. In reality, the legal distinction between doctrine and discipline makes little difference; the one is as obligatory as the other. But it is important to note that in Roman Catholic theology, neither of these practices belongs to sacred tradition, since they cannot be traced back to apostolic times. Because of this, what Luther denounced can be waived by the Roman Church without contradicting the decree of the Council of Trent.⁹

Luther’s attacks on ‘tradition’ were directed mainly against disciplines of this kind which he believed had been added to the simple gospel, and imposed on people as an additional requirement for salvation. This understanding is reflected in many of the early credal statements, such as the Augsburg Confession of 1530, where practices of this kind are denounced as recent and unscriptural innovations.¹⁰ In calling them traditions, Luther was employing a biblical term, but in a way which was different from what had become

⁸ From Luther’s commentary on [Gn. 17:8](#) (*Works*, J. Pelikan ed., Vol. 3, Concordia, St. Louis, 1961, pp. 121–122).

⁹ In fact, the cup has now largely been restored to the laity in the Roman Church, and many people feel that the abolition of compulsory clerical celibacy is only a matter of time.

¹⁰ The second section of the Augsburg Confession contains seven articles devoted almost exclusively to demonstrating this point.

customary in the pre-Reformation Church. Furthermore, Luther did not object to these ‘traditions’ because they were unwritten—they were not—but because they were novelties, which he perceived as a departure from the norms of ancient times.

Where it was a question of an ancient practice not clearly taught in Scripture (i.e. of tradition in the Roman sense), Luther was much more conservative. Infant baptism provides a classic example of this. When challenged to demonstrate that the baptism of children was a New Testament practice, Luther had to resort to a complex defence which ultimately rested on the assertion of an unbroken and unchallenged custom which reached back to apostolic times.¹¹ Like Wycliffe before him, he was not prepared to see corruption in the life of the church from (almost) the very beginning; rather, it was something which had crept in during the Middle Ages, at some unspecified time after the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451).

Luther’s belief that the church had retained its doctrinal purity throughout the Patristic era, losing it gradually only during the so-called Dark Ages, reflected the consensus of Renaissance humanism, which regarded the period after the fall of the Western Roman Empire as one of unrelieved corruption and decay. It was a view which came to be adopted by almost everyone who had been influenced by Erasmus, and in varying degrees it may be regarded as typical of Luther, Calvin [p. 164](#) and the English Reformers. It is only fair to add that many Catholics also shared this view, though of course they did not regard the medieval corruption of the church as quite so extensive. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the Catholic ‘Counter-Reformation’ also went back to the sources in an effort to correct abuses and errors which had crept in, even in the text of the Latin Vulgate.¹²

JOHN CALVIN

The first major breach in this ‘conservative’ Protestant consensus occurred at Geneva, as a result of the teaching of Calvin. Calvin himself was a humanist in the Erasmian tradition, who had a high regard for the traditions of the Patristic period. For example, he defended the use of non-Scriptural vocabulary like ‘person’ and ‘Trinity’ in the formulation of Christian doctrine, and criticized those who objected to such ‘innovations’.¹³ But at the same time, his approach to the application of the *sola Scriptura* principle was different from Luther’s, and produced a new type of conflict within the Protestant movement.

Where Luther had generally been content to purge the church of what he regarded as anti-Evangelical corruptions, Calvin wanted to build the church exclusively on the basis of what was taught in Scripture.¹⁴ This was basically the same principle as that of the Anabaptist ‘radicals’, though Calvin’s conclusions were not the same as theirs. It is

¹¹ See. P. Althaus, *op. cit.*, pp. 359–374.

¹² The Vulgate was thoroughly revised and reissued in 1592. It is interesting to note that the English Catholic translators of the Douay-Rheims Bible justified their choice of the Vulgate as their basic text not only on the ground that it was the church’s decision, but also because they believed that since Jerome had had access to Greek and Hebrew manuscripts earlier than any which were then extant, his translation reflected a more primitive, and therefore more authentic reading of the original text! This assertion was highly dubious in general terms, of course, but on particular points the Catholic translators have been shown to be more accurate. For the relevant material, see G. L. Bray ed., *Documents of the English Reformation*, James Clarke, Cambridge, 1994.

¹³ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, 13, 2–5.

¹⁴ For a discussion of this and what it involved, see R. S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation: A Study of Calvin as Social Worker, Churchman, Pastor and Theologian*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1988, pp. 131–146.

probably easiest to picture him as trying to achieve a balance between the two Protestant tendencies. In the end, he can be said to have used the Anabaptist principle to obtain results much closer to those of the Lutherans.

For example, if it could be shown (as Calvin believed it could) that the episcopal system of church government was post-apostolic, and that in the New Testament there was no real distinction between bishops and presbyters ('priests'), then it seemed clear that the government of the church ought ideally to be what we would now call 'presbyterian'. This was the theory, but in practice it did not mean that Calvin was implacably opposed to bishops; it is well-known, for instance, that he accepted the existence of an episcopal system in the reformed Church of Poland!¹⁵ But it has to be said that among p. 165 Calvin's followers, what was desirable in principle had a way of becoming essential in practice, and the range of *adiaphora* was narrowed accordingly.¹⁶ Calvin's followers in England always regarded episcopacy as a compromise with the pre-Reformation past, to be removed as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

It is curious to note that Puritan logic in this matter was similar to that employed (to the opposite effect!) at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. In each case, what had originally been merely preferable became obligatory, and those who could not follow this development were excommunicated. Luther's attacks on 'tradition' were applied by the Puritans to the practices of the sub-Apostolic Church which had survived the original Reformation purge. A basically conservative church, like that of England, came under attack because it retained practices which had no clear scriptural warrant, even though the Bible did not condemn them either. The wearing of clerical robes, many features of the liturgy, and traditional practices like the blessing of the fields in spring, or the celebration of Christmas, were denounced as relics of paganism which had crept into the Church and corrupted its purity.

RICHARD HOOKER

It was against this situation that Richard Hooker reacted, and wrote a defence of tradition in his famous *Ecclesiastical Polity*. It would be too much to say that his view represented the official mind of the Church of England during the 1590s, when he was writing, but in the course of subsequent controversy, they gradually imposed themselves as the best statement of the conservative position in the church. Hooker never denied the need for the original Reformation, nor did he condemn Calvin for abandoning practices like episcopacy, since the situation in Geneva offered him little alternative. But Hooker was opposed to the idea of change merely for the sake of an abstract principle like *sola Scriptura*, and he thought that decency and order, as well as Christian charity and ecumenicity, demanded that the churches of Christendom be as much like each other as was reasonably possible.¹⁷ In other words, not simply the antiquity but also the universality of such things as infant baptism and episcopal Church government weighed heavily in their favour, and made the quest for an imaginary 'purity' (which had never in fact existed) seem not merely pointless, but mischievous.

¹⁵ R. S. Wallace, *op. cit.*, pp. 141–142.

¹⁶ 'Radical' pressure no doubt played an important part in this, especially in England, where there were many 'radical' elements among the Puritans.

¹⁷ R. Hooker, *op. cit.* IV, 13. His exact words are: 'It is true that the diversity of ceremonies ought not to cause the churches to dissent with one another; but yet it maketh most to avoiding of dissension, that there be amongst them an unity not only in doctrine, but also in ceremonies.'

The Continental Reformation took a different course mainly because there was no powerful Church establishment which could oppose the drift of the Reformers' teaching. In p. 166 Lutheran countries this was not really necessary, since Luther, as we have already seen, did not attack the ancient traditions of the Church. In Reformed countries other than England, the pre-Reformation Church establishment was destroyed, or at least so thoroughly reorganized that any meaningful continuity with the pre-Reformation set-up was broken. In England, where the church structures continued more or less as they had been before the time of Henry VIII, the *tabula rasa* approach of the Continental Calvinists was impossible, and led to conflict with those who sought to adopt it as practical policy.

But the failure of the radical Reformation to achieve its ends is perhaps best attested in their own communities. The closest modern descendants of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, the Amish or Hutterites, are noted for their extreme conservatism in every aspect of life, which has imposed a bondage to tradition far greater than anything the medieval church could ever have imagined. Those who have seen the film *The Witness* may recall the scene in which an Amish boy meets an old Hasidic Jew in a Philadelphia restroom. For a moment, each one thinks he has found another member of his own community—a subtle reminder of the 'Judaistic' character of much modern Anabaptist traditionalism.¹⁸ The Amish represent an extreme, of course, but is useful to recall that they have reached that position from a starting point which was the exact opposite! In their different ways, other ecclesial communities of the left have had to come to terms with tradition, either by reverting to earlier 'Catholic' models, or by inventing their own, and enforcing them as 'denominational distinctives'.

No community can live without rules, and experience has shown that the Bible does not give enough guidance in this area for a viable church organization to function without supplementary procedures and practices. The real issue is whether and how these should be established and to what extent they are capable of being altered if circumstances require. The Reformers would have wanted maximum flexibility in this area, but sadly, their modern descendants have not always found it easy to live up to this ideal. However, the voice of experience would suggest that a church which changes gradually has a greater chance of being *semper reformanda* than one which razes everything to the ground and tries to replace the old structure with its version of the 'pure' New Testament *ecclesia*.

Dr. Gerald Bray teaches at Oak Hill Theological College, London UK and is visiting professor at Beeson School of Divinity, Sanford University, Birmingham, Alabama, USA. p. 167

VI

Scripture and Tradition in Enlightenment Thought

¹⁸ And incidentally, a modern example of the ancient criticism of otiose traditions as 'Judaistic'.

Bruce Wearne

INTRODUCTION

It is not possible to deal comprehensively with this subject here because, in fact, this involves basic problems in developing a critical appraisal of our modern intellectual traditions. This is the topic which has already been broached by Dooyeweerd.

Enlightenment is certainly 'in' today. Whether it is the historical analysis of the mid-to-late 18th century, or the philosophical examination of the leading ideas of the *philosophes*, nor in some other more immediate sense, earnest debate about the meaning of Enlightenment is taking place across the globe with an intensity that often leaves young students breathless and confused.

What is Enlightenment? This was the question which the great idealistic philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) asked as he sought to lay a new foundation for philosophy, reason and science. *Sapere aude*—'Dare to Know' was his motto.¹ This is also the question which many are asking today as they seek to come to terms with our 'post-modern condition'. In science and scholarship, in popular culture, literature, the arts, mass media, political life and among all sectors and groups, the search goes on for a new explanation of our human dilemma. For modern people this involves a search to discover the means of enlightenment and often this will prompt serious students to re-consider the meaning of the Enlightenment. The fervent promises of previous generations—whether atheist, materialist, liberal, individualist, libertarian or conservative—have become hollow rhetoric. For many the human condition seems to be an onward march into deterioration, an inevitable slide into anarchy, a dark nihilism and despair.

In a critical observation about Australian spirituality, the historian Manning Clark observed that the p.168 Roman Catholics and Protestants depleted themselves as cultural formers by their life-and-death struggle with each other. Meanwhile, he writes, the 'Sons of Enlightenment' wrested control of the well-springs of Australian culture by advocating political and other policies which appealed to the basic hedonism, materialism and pragmatism of the white Australian colonists. This, he says, is the historical account of how Australia, as a modern society, embraced modernity, and why today they are faced with, what he termed, 'The Kingdom of Nothingness'.

So what is this world changing power called Enlightenment? In this context we seek insight, by comparison and contrast, into the differing views of Scripture and tradition among the various *Christian* traditions.²

¹ *Was ist Aufklärung?*

'Enlightenment is the departure of man from the immaturity for which he has himself to blame. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one's own understanding without the guidance of another. One has oneself to blame for this immaturity when the reason for it is not in a lack of understanding but of determination and courage to make use of one's own understanding without dependence on another. *Sapere aude*. 'Be courageous, make use of your own understanding' is therefore the slogan of the Enlightenment.'

² Manning Clark *Occasional Writings and Speeches* (Fontana/Collins, 1980) 79–80. Manning Clark (1915–1991) was the foremost Australian historian who attempted to combine rigorous empirical techniques with literary and imaginative intuition. His contribution has sparked controversy, possibly because his form of history-writing is viewed as unfashionable. See also his writings: C. M. H. Clark, *A History of Australia* 6 volumes (Melbourne University Press, 1965–1991); *A Short History of Australia* (Penguin, 1987); *A Discovery of Australia* (ABC, 1975). Two biographical pieces *The Puzzles of Childhood* (1989) and *The Quest for Grace* (1990) which reveal his spiritual vision were published shortly before his death in 1991.

But we should not limit our discussion to Christian traditions.³ Why? Because as we struggle to develop a biblical understanding of the nature, structure and power of tradition, as such, it is well to remember that we do so in a social and cultural context in which many traditions, with differing spiritual orientations, are at work. Moreover, the intellectual tradition which had flowered from the root of the 18th century Enlightenment, has been very important in determining current understandings of tradition in a general sense.

To be Christian in the biblical sense means more than merely facing up to, and living in terms of, traditions which claim to derive their power from the Bible. We need to deepen our insight and strengthen our discernment about the spiritual forces inherent in non-Christian traditions. In particular, we need to deepen our spiritual awareness of the major spiritual tradition within which we, in the late twentieth century must now live our lives—this is, as we shall demonstrate, the tradition of Enlightenment, the religion of humanity.

Christian churches, the world over, struggle to make a good profession, against the myriad spiritual forces arrayed against Christ and his kingly rule. We take this to mean that our war is not a 'civilised Christian struggle' against 'Barbaric Paganism' as if the 'enemy' can be identified solely with indigenous spiritual traditions of the lands where the gospel has hitherto not been proclaimed; missionaries also struggle with the cultural baggage that they inevitably take with them. The 'cultural baggage' p.169 which Christians from the West carry into a missionary situation includes their response to the dominant spiritual powers at work in their own 'civilized' homelands.

But not only in the missionary situation is this spiritual struggle forced upon us. Efforts to develop a Christian life-style, and to build Christian organizations, must always come to terms with local conditions and their attendant spiritual direction. If local conditions and traditions are ignored, then any Christian contribution risks impoverishment and irrelevance.

Christians in North-American and European settings cannot understand their own (Christian) traditions in isolation. Traditions are in tension with each other as expressions of an underlying spiritual competition for our allegiance in all areas of social and cultural endeavour.

ENLIGHTENMENT TODAY

The major spiritual force which has dominated Western European and North American society in the last two hundred years has not been Christian. This same spirit, a religious impulse which offers to take all of social life with it, has in this century dominated the other regions of the globe as well. With an intensity for renewal that seems to be ever increasing, the spirit of Enlightenment truly rides forth to conquer.

Now, when our time is widely referred to as a 'post-modern' age, some are saying that we have entered a New Age. This kind of popular philosophy is driven by strong commercial and consumerist interests and fails to understand the *depth* at which the Enlightenment religion engages in criticism and self-criticism, also of its most treasured achievements. The Enlightenment claims to give enlightenment on the decisive role of

³ The recent contributions of such scholars as Barbara Thiering, *Jesus the Man: A New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Sydney: Doubleday, 1992) and Bishop Spong (JS Spong), *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus* (San Francisco: 1992) need to be carefully analyzed in this light. A standard work investigating the history of biblical interpretation is Hans W Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (London: Yale University Press, 1980).

human reason. Even those movements that claim to chart an entirely new course, such as the New Age Movement, remain deeply indebted to the Enlightenment. For all their criticism of Modernism, they have not relinquished the central tenet of the autonomy of human reason.⁴

The current kind of 'rights talk' which uses the notion of individual right as a trump card in all political dispute finds its origin in the Enlightenment *individualist* ideology.⁵ But so does the social democratic concern for social justice and a social system based on enlightened self-interest. Moreover, the various liberation movements that compete for recognition in public life are heavily influenced by ideas that gain their leverage and anchorage from the Enlightenment view of the supremacy of Reason and Rationality. Trade Unionism, Corporatism, Feminism, Gay Liberation, Animal Liberation, not to forget national liberation movements around the globe, are all indicative of the power of Enlightenment as a religious worldview. Competing Enlightenment ideologies can be found at work in political parties, p. 170 welfare programmes, government bureaucracies, schools and hospitals.

THE ORIGINS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Historical

When we refer to the Enlightenment as an historical event, we are referring in the first instance to a period of time in the history of modern philosophy in which the ideas of human self determination, the religious drive of the dogma of human autonomy, came to their most powerful modern expression. As Peter Gay puts it:

The Enlightenment, then, was a single army with a single banner, with a large central corps, a right and a left wing, daring scouts, and lame stragglers. And it enlisted soldiers who did not call themselves philosophers but who were their teachers, intimates, or disciples ... The Enlightenment was a volatile mixture of classicism, impiety, and science, the philosophers, in a phrase, were modern pagans.⁶

The tradition of Enlightenment, enunciated by its leading proponents, includes the plays of Diderot, the stories of Voltaire, the jurisprudence of Montesquieu, the theory of knowledge and the radical scepticism of Hume, the polemics of Lessing and the critiques of Kant. It had French, Italian, German, English, Scottish and North American manifestations. It finds itself in historiography, economic theory, sociology, literature and later on in psychology. It is multifaceted, cosmopolitan and revolutionary. It has progressed by conquering new fields in ethics, law, metaphysics, and practical politics.

The Enlightenment is usually identified by the hundred year span beginning with the English Revolution and ending with the French Revolution: 1689–1789. As such it constitutes a potent historical nodal point for us as we try to appreciate the ebbs and flows, the waves and troughs, of modern history—modern history is the history of the world that followed in its wake. It shaped the American Revolution, the birth of modern

⁴ An important attempt to trace this with respect to sociology has been Geoffrey Hawthorne, *Enlightenment and Despair—A History of Sociology* (Cambridge University Press, 1976). A revised edition appeared in 1987.

⁵ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Power Trips and Other Journeys: Essays in Feminism as Civic Discourse* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 92–5.

⁶ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment—An Introduction: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1966) p. 6.

Europe and the gigantic economic shift from an agrarian to an industrial society. It now shapes the so-called Third World.

The Enlightenment, built upon foundations laid by Bacon, Locke and Newton, included an appeal to pagan antiquity, whilst claiming the entire globe for itself. It may have gained leverage from deistic ideas of a 'skied deity'⁷ from earlier times, p. 171 but it represented a determined move toward an unambiguous assertion of human autonomy. In that sense the history of the Enlightenment is still very much alive.

Religious Origins of Enlightenment

As much as we can discuss the 'historical' origins of the Enlightenment by locating it in the 18th century we still must remember that it gained coherence through its leading ideas—its religious commitments and its comprehensive humanist *Weltanschauung*. Therefore it is important not to speak of origins solely in terms of *when* such beliefs became current and powerful; but also in terms of *what* these beliefs were, *how* they were understood, and *where* they led.

The Enlightenment is based in religious confession that humankind is autonomous. People should make the laws that govern their own lives. There should be no law to which humans are subject that humans cannot control themselves. That is Enlightenment in a nutshell.

This confession does not mean that Enlightenment has been already attained throughout society and throughout the world. The affirmation of Reason in *theory*, should not be equated with the establishment of Reason in *practice*. It means, in the words of Kant, that this age is to be an age of enlightenment. Among other things, it was to be an age when the passive and docile pupil would be replaced by the active and critical student. In the modern age, Enlightenment has been viewed as a function of education, an enlightenment education system.

The core thinkers of the Enlightenment *Weltanschauung*, the leaders who set the agenda, were daring and audacious. They stood apart from their contemporaries not only because they wished to free themselves from Christian traditions, but because they wanted to cast a new light—the light of Reason—upon these traditions and re-work them into a new Enlightenment understanding of why the world was as it was. They sought to renew reason; to build a new tradition of Reason.

The modern world was a project, the absolute necessity of which forced itself upon their enlightened consciousness. Light here should be uncovered to shine in the darkness there. As such the first Enlightenment thinkers took a new and critical approach to classical learning. They turned to it to argue that Reason—and not any ancient superstition—was to be supreme. The rule of 'Stupidity, Christianity and Ignorance', according to David Hume, was at an end when there was Enlightenment.

⁷ Basil Willey in his standard work, *The Seventeenth Century Background* 1986/1934, refers to the process in scientific discourse whereby religion, or more particularly God himself, was 'skied'. 'Religious truth, then, must be "skied", elevated far out of reach, not in order that it may be more devoutly approached, but in order to keep it out of mischief. But having secured his main object, namely, to clear the universe for science, Bacon can afford to be quite orthodox ...' (p. 34) When this approach to science is compared with some of the more scholastically influenced passages of the Westminster Confession of Faith, which refer to the 'great distance' between God and his creation, it becomes clearer why orthodox Christians could contribute to a further secularization of science. Though they were theistic in theology they adopted an implicit deism for the other sciences, and hence provided a basis, albeit an unstable one, upon which the further secularization of science would necessarily take place. This point has been commented upon by Keith C Sewell. For related arguments see his *A High Challenge for Tough Times* (Melbourne: Research Press, 1992) and *That Was Then; This Is Now* (Melbourne: Research Press, 1993).

In brief then, the Enlightenment religious vision, which has dominated the western world now for 200 years, is an assertion of human autonomy, established by an assertion of intellectual independence from state and church, and aims for an unfettered Reason which must be allowed to conquer all spheres in a sustained cosmopolitan crusade.

This is not to say that within the Enlightenment tradition there has p. 172 not been disputation and 'denominational' conflicts. Consider the artistic battles between different *avant garde* schools, in music, art and literature. Witness the intense, and often bloody rivalry between political ideologies of left and right. Individualism and socialism both define themselves in terms of the Enlightenment proclamation of human autonomy. Consider the battle between idealist and positivist, and the realist who claims to combine both. Witness the barely concealed *animus* between proponents of methodological nihilism—the so-called *de-constructionists*, and those who claim tradition to be on the side of a *hermeneutic* philosophy. And then there are those who seek to incorporate all warring parties into their *system*.

Moreover, the ongoing critique manifests itself in relation to ethnicity, gender, age. It is breathed into the body of pressure groups, it finds expression in alternative policies to reshape the market economy and the welfare state. In the terms identified by Groen van Prinsterer, the Enlightenment signals the coming together of the religion of unbelief and the demand for revolution.⁸ The Enlightenment aim is a comprehensive, radical and total reconstruction of all of life. Now when Peter Gay names this movement as 'the rise of modern paganism' he adds that this should not be read as if Enlightenment is a retreat to a golden age in Greek Antiquity.⁹ Rather it is a concerted attempt to appeal to the ancient Greeks, and their Roman successors, to justify their pursuit of modernity and the rejection of Christianity. To put it in genealogical terms, the line of Reason does not come through Christianity. The *philosophes* believed that Reason has to be won in the present, and to do this the ancient philosophers are systematically re-worked to become precursors and even advocates of modernity.

ENLIGHTENMENT AND TRADITION

The examination of tradition, according to Enlightened thinkers, involves a battle between two contending tendencies: there is Reason arrayed against Ignorance, Light against Darkness. There is Truth and there is Superstition. There were Hebrews (lost is the absurdity of Supernatural Revelation) and there were Hellenes (who searched for truth via the love of wisdom). The world is divided between the life affirmers and the life deniers; those who face up to their humanity and 'the narrowers and the straighteners' (Manning Clark's term). Coming to terms with tradition meant a systematic sorting, on the basis of Reason, between and among the traditions within which we live and move and have our being. The fundamental battle is viewed not in Christian and biblical terms, as between the City of God P. 173 and the City of this World, as with Augustine, but as between Reason and Unreason, between the Power of Enlightenment and superstition, between darkness and error.

Not only was the Enlightenment a scholarly search to re-interpret the past with an eye to the forward march of Reason in the present; it was also an attempt to reconstruct the picture of the past so as to honour those earlier initiatives which were compatible with

⁸ In 1848 G. Groen van Prinsterer wrote a major tract *Ongeloof en Revolutie* that helped to change the course of Dutch political history. It has been translated in full as *Groen Van Prinsterer's Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution* (Harry van Dyke ed and trans) (Ontario: Wedge, Jordan Station, 1989).

⁹ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment* (1966), p. 8ff.

Reason's rule over all of life. In time, this would flower into a philosophy of history based on the idea of Progress. As noted above, though Positivist and Hegelian streams competed with each other, they did so as alternative forms of the Enlightenment perspective.

When it comes to the Bible it is clear that the Enlightenment is, at root, antagonistic to the confession that this Book is the 'Word of God in the words of men'. Christian thinkers who have accommodated themselves to the Enlightenment in some way may be reluctant to 'deconstruct' the sacred text in the way that the more radical hermeneutics is prone to do. But the underlying antagonism remains.

There are those Enlightenment thinkers who would consign the Scriptures to the flames, because it simply represents religious authority standing over against, and above, the undoubted authority of Reason. Mythology has to be destroyed. Truth has to be affirmed. This latter is impossible as long as humans hanker after a Divine Norm for their lives. And after all, such hankering, as Karl Marx remarked, is simply indicative of a deep-down structural alienation, a search for an opiate, to escape reality.¹⁰ But let us recall that this ultra-worldliness did not always lead to a denial of all divinity, as Marx tried so valiantly to do. Neo-paganism came to expression in various forms. Hegel's philosophy enshrined itself in a pantheistic pretence, Comte's positivism advocated a sociological priesthood, just as the goddess Reason had been enthroned during the bloody days of the French Revolution.

Deepened insight is required here. Modernity has often been proclaimed as the Age of Science. But to unravel the various scientific traditions, as well as to understand the seemingly inevitable secularization of science, we need to grasp the fact that science itself searches for its True Divine point of reference. When we see that science, like all human activity, fulfils its calling out of an inner devotion to the Lord God, or an idol, we begin to unravel the spectacular and tortuous history of the Enlightenment as it has been manifested throughout the entire scientific encyclopaedia.¹¹

IMPLICATIONS

The full force of the Enlightenment *Weltanschauung* reminds us that a discussion does not necessarily have a Christian character just because P. 174 we are attempting to discuss sacred topics like Scripture and tradition. We can approach this question with a resolute piety and might succeed in giving externally authenticated Christian gloss to the discussion. But if we have accommodated our thinking to Enlightenment assumptions about human autonomy, our piety is fraudulent. Hence as we examine the place of tradition in the human condition, and as we examine the details of various traditions, we must do so self-critically recognizing the fully religious character of our work.

The Enlightenment religious impulse seeks its own view of the relation between Scripture and tradition. As much as Enlightenment is a religious impulse which would overthrow Christian profession, it is also an attempt to re-examine Holy Scripture and the Christian tradition. On the basis of Sovereign Reason it will claim that aspects of various Christian interpretations should be respected. But such claims do not negate the fundamental religious antithesis that is at work in the reading, exposition and appropriation of Scripture as well as the analysis and interpretation of the manifold human traditions that are not Enlightenment generated.

¹⁰ Karl Marx 'Towards the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction' in L. Easton and K. Guddat (eds), *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (NY: Doubleday, 1967) pp. 249–251.

¹¹ The best recent book on this, developing a critique of theoretical reflection from a Christian standpoint, is Roy A Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

As stated above, the Enlightenment does hold to a view which appears to be ‘a religious antithesis’. It can do so because even if the powers of reason are deified, the character of theoretical thought, based in creaturely structure of logical thinking, is maintained. It is maintained not by Sovereign Reason, not by the will of human thinkers, nor by the popular sentiment of the scientific (or any other) community. We must make sure that our Christian thinking about Scripture and tradition does not appropriate the biblical teaching of the *antithesis* as if the distinction between Christ and Belial is merely a logical contradiction. The basic antithesis in life is in opposing directions and opposing forces; the one deifies reason, the other lets God be God.

CONCLUSION

Both the individualistic view (it is right if it is right for me) and the communalistic view (truth is negotiated consensus) find their origins in the Enlightenment. The impact of both streams of the Enlightenment tradition can be seen in the way evangelical Christianity in the West, but also now the world over, fights among itself concerning the assumptions that undergird a biblical hermeneutic. Such controversy needs to be subjected to a concerted historical investigation.

The Enlightenment tradition is a variegated cultural and intellectual movement which is cosmopolitan in its focus and global in its scale. It is a self-conscious opponent of historic biblical Christianity. It has claimed many great achievements, relentlessly moving on to bring all of its achievements into the light of Reason, and where Reason is no longer capable of maintaining its hold, a presumed human autonomy its leading idea. Both Scripture and tradition come within its purview. That is because it is a religious movement which must give an account of all things. But as a religious movement it is being continually emptied of meaning even as it claims Reason [p. 175](#) and Human Autonomy as the basis of its endeavours.

A Christian understanding of the dynamic inter-relation between the written Word of God and tradition is one side of our attempt to understand ourselves in relation to the modern world and its dominant world-view. But the underlying conquering zeal of the Enlightenment, plus its manifold devastations, should provoke us to a serious self-criticism of our thought and our action, the traditions within which we seek to serve the Living God who in Jesus Christ has freed us from the debilitations of all idolatry and calls us to serve him, to trade and build traditions that honour his rule, in his vineyard.

BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY

The definitive Christian critique of the Enlightenment philosophy remains Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (1955–1957).

Also highly recommended is Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment—The Rise of Modern Paganism* (1965).

Dr. Bruce Wearne teaches philosophy at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. [p. 176](#)

VII

Scripture and Tradition in the World Council of Churches

Martin Hamel

‘TRADITION IN THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES’

The World Council of Churches (founded 1948) is by its very nature concerned with the issue of ‘tradition’. Even in the decades before the World Council was founded the issue was dealt with by the Movement for Faith and Order (founded after the World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, 1910; First World Conference for Faith and Order, 1927, in Lausanne).

But a look into the catalogue of the Ecumenical Archives and Library at Geneva shows that it was above all in the Commission on Faith and Order in the fifties and sixties that the theme of tradition was dealt with explicitly.

In accordance with the proposal of the Third World Conference on Faith and Order (1952) ‘to explore more deeply the resources to be found in that common history which we have as Christians and which we have discovered to be longer, larger and richer than any of our separate histories’, a Theological Commission on ‘Tradition and Traditions’ was set up. Its interim report¹ and its final report² were submitted to Section II of the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, 1963 at Montreal.

The report drafted there by Section II on the basis of these two papers bears the title ‘Scripture, Tradition and traditions’.³ While there is the formal placement of Scripture in the first place, the concept clearly dominating the report is not Scripture but ‘Tradition’.

In Section II of Montreal the delegates p. 177 of many different churches studied together ‘the problem of the one Tradition and the many traditions’ (§ 38). The all-compromising idea of ‘the one Tradition and the many traditions’ and of the relation between the first and the second covers the whole report. This will be traced here.

In their report the delegates distinguish between a number of different meanings of the word *tradition*: ‘We speak of the *Tradition* (with a capital “T”), *tradition* (with a small “t”) and *traditions*. By the *Tradition* is meant the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church, Christ himself present in the life of the Church. By *tradition* is meant the traditionary process. The term *traditions* is used in two senses, to indicate both the diversity of forms of expression and also what we call confessional traditions, for instance the Lutheran tradition or the Reformed tradition.’ (§ 39)

¹ The Old and the New in the Church, World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order, Report on Tradition and Traditions’, ed. G. W. H. Lampe and David M. Paton, *Faith and Order Paper No. 34* (Geneva: WCC, 1961).

² ‘The Report of the Theological Commission on Tradition and Traditions, Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal, Canada, 12–26 July 1963’ *Faith and Order Paper No. 40* Geneva: WCC, 1963.

³ ‘Scripture, Tradition and Traditions’, Report of Section II, in Patrick C. Rodger and Lukas Vischer ed., *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order* (Montreal, London: 1963). *The Report, Faith and Order Paper No. 42* (SCM Press) pp. 50–61; reproduced also in: The Bible: Its Authority and Interpretation in the Ecumenical Movement’, *Faith and Order Paper No. 99*, ed. Ellen Flesseman-van Leer (Geneva: WCC, 1980), pp. 18–29.

Let us have a look at the first of the three meanings of the word tradition: '*the Tradition*'. What is its exact content? Throughout the report it is often described in manifold ways:

'the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church, Christ himself present in the life of the Church' (§ 39); 'the revealed truth, the Gospel' (§ 45); 'the Christian faith' (§ 46); 'God's revelation and self-giving in Christ, present in the life of the Church' (§ 46); 'the one truth and reality which is Christ' (§ 47); 'the Gospel' (§ 50) etc.

But in these rather general descriptions the exact content of '*the Tradition*' ultimately remains unclear. This is stated even explicitly: 'The content of the Tradition cannot be exactly defined, for the reality it transmits can never be fully contained in propositional forms (§ 67).' Here the question could arise: If the content of the *Tradition* is so open—how then can one dare to assert that this *Tradition* is 'embodied' in the confessional *traditions* (possibly in all?) of the different churches? (§ 47; cf. the question in § 48) Moreover one has to consider that in the report the 'Tradition' transmitted in the 'tradition' (= in the traditionary process) is assigned a greater significance than Scripture.

The first subsection considered 'the problem of the relation of Tradition to Scripture, regarded as the written prophetic and apostolic testimony to God's act in Christ, whose authority we all accept (§ 40)'.

How is this relation of Tradition to Scripture described?

'... God has revealed himself in the history of the people of God in the Old Testament and in Jesus Christ, his Son, the mediator between God and man.... The testimony of prophets and apostles inaugurated the Tradition of his revelation. The once-for-all disclosure of God in Jesus Christ inspired the apostles and disciples to give witness to the revelation given in the person and work of Christ.... The oral and written tradition of the prophets and apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit led to the formation of Scriptures and to the canonization of the Old and New Testaments as the Bible of the Church (§ 42).' 'Tradition' and 'tradition' now are emphasized conspicuously strongly p. 178 as compared with Scripture: 'The very fact that Tradition precedes the Scriptures points to the significance of tradition, but also to the Bible as the treasure of the Word of God (§ 42).'

That is why the old controversial theological theme, 'Scripture and Tradition' is dealt with in a completely new way.

'... ever since the Reformation "Scripture and Tradition" has been a matter of controversy in the dialogue between Roman Catholic and Protestant theology. On the Roman Catholic side, tradition has generally been understood as divine truth not expressed in Holy Scripture alone, but orally transmitted. The Protestant position has been an appeal to Holy Scripture alone, as the infallible and sufficient authority in all matters pertaining to salvation, to which all human traditions should be subjected (§ 43).'

For a variety of reasons—according to the authors of the report—it had now become necessary to reconsider these positions. What reason could that be? Above all the modern biblical scholarship and the experiences of ecumenical encounter: 'Historical study and not least the encounter of the churches in the ecumenical movement have led us to realize that the proclamation of the Gospel is always inevitably historically conditioned (§ 44).'

By this new dogma the proclamation of the gospel in the holy Scripture is historically relativized as well as the reformatory position of the *Sola Scriptura* which follows from the cognition of faith that 'The Holy Scripture is God's Word'. The Christian faith and a biblically determined theology in contrast know that the proclamation of the gospel has a totally other and even decisive 'conditio' by which it is 'conditioned'. In other passages the delegates make recognition of this themselves.

In their reconsideration of the problem of 'Tradition and Scripture' (in this new order) the delegates proposed the following statement:

Our starting-point is that we are all living in a tradition which goes back to our Lord and has its roots in the Old Testament, and are all indebted to that tradition inasmuch as we have received the revealed truth, the Gospel, through its being transmitted from one generation to another. Thus we can say that we exist as Christians by the Tradition of the Gospel (the *paradosis* of the *kerygma*) testified in Scripture, transmitted in and by the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit (§ 45).

'Tradition taken in this sense is actualized in the preaching of the Word, in the administration of the Sacraments and worship, in Christian teaching and theology, and in mission and witness to Christ by the lives of the members of the Church (§ 45).'

'What is transmitted in the process of tradition is the Christian faith, not only as a sum of tenets, but as a living reality transmitted through the operation of the Holy Spirit (§ 46).'

'We can speak of the Christian Tradition (with a capital "T"), whose content is God's revelation and self-giving in Christ, present in the life of the Church (§ 46).'

But is the '*Tradition*' present or even omnipresent in all the churches? Are there no problems? Are the life [p. 179](#) and the history of the churches not characterized by the many *traditions* much more than by the one *Tradition*? Is there at all a relation of the many traditions to the one Tradition? And how could it be described?

The delegates indeed make the thesis: 'But this Tradition which is the work of the Holy Spirit is "embodied" in traditions (in the two senses of the word, both as referring to diversity in forms of expression, and in the sense of separate communions). The traditions in Christian history are distinct from, and yet connected with, the Tradition. They are the expressions and manifestations in diverse historical (!; cf. § 44) forms of the one truth and reality which is Christ (§ 47).'

The report itself is aware that this evaluation of the traditions poses serious problems, e.g. questions such as these are raised: 'Is it possible to determine more precisely what the content of the one Tradition is, and by what means? Do all traditions which claim to be Christian contain the Tradition? How can we distinguish between traditions embodying the true Tradition and merely human traditions? Where do we find the genuine Tradition, and where impoverished tradition or even distortion of tradition? Tradition can be a faithful transmission of the Gospel, but also a distortion of it (§ 48).'

But are those important and serious questions answered in the report? Is the underlying quest for the truth followed up and will it be answered at the end?

The named questions imply the search for a *criterion*. This had been a main concern for the church since its beginning: 'In the New Testament we find warnings against false teaching and deviations from the truth of the Gospel. For the post-apostolic Church the appeal to the Tradition received from the apostles became the criterion. As this Tradition was embodied in the apostolic writings, it became natural to use those writings as an authority for determining where the true Tradition was to be found (§ 49).'

'In the midst of all tradition, these early records of divine revelation have a special basic value, because of their apostolic character. But the Gnostic crisis in the second century shows that the mere existence of apostolic writings did not solve the problem. The question of *interpretation* arose as soon as the appeal to written documents made its appearance. When the canon of the New Testament had been finally defined and recognized by the Church, it was still more natural to use this body of writings as an indispensable criterion (§ 49).'

It is striking: the search for a criterion for the genuine Tradition in the many traditions indeed first turns to the Scripture, but then turns away from it again and towards an entity

outside Scripture: towards a 'hermeneutical principle' for the (in every new 'situation') necessary 'interpretation' of Scripture.

The delegates stress the necessity of *interpretation* of the Scripture in ever new *situations*:

The Tradition in its written form, as Holy Scripture (comprising both the Old and the New Testament), has to be interpreted by the Church in ever new situations.... A mere reiteration of the words of Holy Scriptures would be a betrayal of the Gospel p. 180 which has to be made understandable and has to convey a challenge to the world (§ 50).

One would like to ask: Has the gospel really to be *made* understandable? Isn't it understandable? The Scripture also is understandable (*claritas scripturae*) and is its own interpreter (*scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres*). The gospel has to be preached! And only if 'the proclamation of the Gospel is always inevitably historically conditioned' (§ 44) and if (as in the following (§ 52)) the Spirit of God and the letter are separated (and the latter is historically relativised), then there arises the necessity of clarifying interpretation, to bridge the '*garstigen Graben*' (G. E. Lessing)—in a self-chosen manner.

'The necessity of interpretation raises again the question of the criterion for the genuine Tradition. Throughout the history of the Church the criterion has been sought in the Holy Scriptures rightly interpreted. But what is 'right interpretation?' (§ 51)

In the answer to that (with regard to the Holy Scripture) a remarkable, downright spiritualistic separation of Spirit and letter is performed.

'The Scriptures as documents can be letter only, It is the Spirit who is the Lord and Giver of life. Accordingly we may say that the right interpretation (taking the word in the widest possible sense) is that interpretation which is guided by the Holy Spirit. But this does not solve the problem of *criterion*. We arrive at the quest for a *hermeneutical principle* (§ 52).'

Separated from and opposed to the Spirit the 'bare' letter is devaluated rigorously and does not come into question as the criterion for the genuine Tradition. But also the Spirit and his theonomous guidance in the interpretation is refused. Rather one wants a criterion that can be handled, a 'hermeneutical principle'. This may (or even should?) be found elsewhere than in Scripture (cf. § 53).

This problem—according to the delegates—has been dealt with in different ways by the various churches. 'In some confessional traditions the accepted hermeneutical principle has been that any portion of Scripture is to be interpreted in the light of Scripture as a whole. In others the key has been sought in what is considered to be the centre of Holy Scripture, and the emphasis has been primarily on the Incarnation, or on the Atonement and Redemption, or on justification by faith, or again on the message of the nearness of the Kingdom of God, or on the ethical teachings of Jesus. In yet others, all the emphasis is laid upon what Scripture says to the individual conscience, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In the Orthodox Church the hermeneutical key is found in the mind of the Church, especially as expressed in the Fathers of the Church and in the Ecumenical Councils. In the Roman Catholic Church the key is found in the deposit of faith, of which the Church's magisterium is the guardian. In other traditions again, the creeds, complemented by confessional documents or by the definitions of Ecumenical Councils and the witness of the Fathers, are considered to give the right key to the understanding of Scripture (§ 53).'

In view of this enumeration of hermeneutical keys the delegates p. 181 however make the assertion: 'In none of these cases where the principle of interpretation is found elsewhere than in Scripture is the authority thought to be alien to the central concept of

Holy Scripture. On the contrary, it is considered as providing just a key to the understanding of what is said in Scripture (§ 53).’

In view of their confessional understanding of holy Scripture (which sometimes produces divergence in the interpretation of Scripture) the delegates ask: ‘How can we overcome the situation in which we all read Scripture in the light of our own traditions?’ (§ 54)

The answer reads: modern exegesis of the Bible and ecumenical common Bible study.

Modern biblical scholarship has already done so much to bring the different churches together by conducting them towards the Tradition. It is along this line that the necessity for further thinking about the hermeneutical problem arises: i.e. how can we reach an adequate interpretation of the Scriptures, so that the Word of God addresses us and Scripture is safeguarded from subjective or arbitrary exegesis.... that we emphasize more than in the past a common study of Scripture whenever representatives of the various churches meet? Should we not study more the Fathers of all periods of the Church and their interpretations of the Scriptures in the light of our ecumenical task? Does not the ecumenical situation demand that we search for the Tradition by re-examining sincerely our own particular traditions? (§ 55)

Montreal was a hermeneutical watershed. It was determined by the growing influence of modern critical scholarship reading of the Bible. Take for example Ernst Käsemann who then stated a ‘diversity’ of different theologies within the New Testament, whereas the WCC General Secretary Visser ‘T Hooft still stressed the unity of Scripture in Jesus Christ.

Some years after Montreal a study report under the title ‘The Significance of the Hermeneutical Problem for the Ecumenical Movement’ was presented to the Faith and Order Commission at its meeting in Bristol 1967.⁴

In paragraph B II ‘Tradition, Scripture and the Church’ that classic consensus-formulation at Montreal is cited with consent:

‘We can say that we exist as Christians by the Tradition of the Gospel (the *paradosis* of the *kerygma*), testified in Scripture, transmitted in and by the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit (Montreal § 45).’

This sentence—like the Bristol document—covers however different possible solutions. Depending on the emphasis laid upon the various elements of the sentence the relationship between Scripture and the church can still be understood differently.⁵

In the course of exegesis and discussion three positions have emerged p. 182 and are identified in the report: In a first position—it is the classic protestant stance of the ‘*sola scriptura*’—the authority lies in *Scripture* as the sole norm of the truth:

For some, Scripture is to be regarded as the sole norm of truth on which the Church is entirely dependent. To know the truth Christians are to have recourse exclusively to this primary testimony as it has been handed down to them by the Church. The main principles

⁴ ‘The Significance of the Hermeneutical Problem for the Ecumenical Movement’, in: *New Directions in Faith and Order* (Bristol, 1967). Reports—Minutes—Documents, *Faith and Order Paper No. 50* (Geneva: WCC, 1968), pp. 32–41; reproduced also in (and cited here): *The Bible. Its Authority and Interpretation in the Ecumenical Movement, Faith and Order Paper No. 99*. ed. Ellen Flesseman-van Leer (Geneva: WCC, 1980), pp. 30–41.

⁵ Bristol Report, in Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, p. 38.

of interpretation, however difficult to discover or to stake, will be dictated by Scripture itself.⁶

In a further position the authority lies in Scripture so far as has been read in the context of *the general Christian tradition*:

Some would rather emphasize that Scripture is the product of the same tradition which has had a continuous life in the Church. It is verbal expression, but it does not contain the full truth. It needs to be read in the context of the general Christian tradition, which apart from Scripture finds expression in sacraments, creeds, Christian thinking and cultural values indirectly derived from Scripture.⁷

In a third position the authority lies in a *variegated complex of Christian truth*, as it is understood today, in which Scripture is only *one* element:

Still others would emphasize that Scripture is only one element in a variegated complex of Christian truth. It accompanies the life of the Church, and must be taken into account with other factors through which truth is mediated, such as the evolution of human thought, cultural development, what the churches have made out of the biblical outlook, and perhaps much else besides.⁸

That the biblical text should be the starting point for the discussion of any issue is (by this position) not simply to be taken for granted, but must be argued for in each instance. It is not finally authoritative.⁹

‘The Church is in dialogue with Scripture, but has been fed from many sources, in the light of which biblical statements may have to be declared inadequate, or erroneous, or as “without meaning” except as modified by truth arrived at from these other sources.’¹⁰

As so often, also here, doctrinal statements actually excluding each other are put side by side as ‘different possible positions’ as if having equal rights. A doctrinal judgement is seemingly avoided. By this, however, in fact the unheard, even the heretical is declared as theologically presentable at court and is presupposed in future as accepted.

The authors of the Bristol study indeed assert that none of these three positions was held exclusively. They were differing emphases and were to be seen in relation to each other.¹¹ In contrast to that in the report of section IV (‘Tradition and p. 183 Traditions’) of Bristol—with reference to this paragraph B II—the Bristol delegates rightly stated that there is no agreement as to where the authority for the truth is to be found. Therefore the main recommendation of that section is for a comprehensive study on authority, especially on the authority of the Bible.¹²

This led to a new study process which found its conclusion in a report ‘The Authority of the Bible’, submitted and accepted by the Faith and Order Commission at its meeting at

⁶ Bristol Report, in, Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, p. 38f.

⁷ Bristol Report, in, Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, p. 39.

⁸ Bristol Report, in, Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, p. 39.

⁹ Bristol Report, in, Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, p. 39.

¹⁰ Bristol Report, in, Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, p. 39.

¹¹ Bristol Report, in, Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, p. 39. How is this statement compatible with the claim to exclusiveness by the first position?

¹² cf. *New Directions in Faith and Order* (Bristol, 1967). *Reports—Minutes—Documents, Faith and Order Paper No. 50* (Geneva: WCC, 1968), pp. 154, 58f.

Louvain in 1971.¹³ We don't want to turn to that study report here nor to the last study in the series of Faith and Order studies in that connection.¹⁴ The author of this line did some research on that at another place.¹⁵ Here only the trend will be outlined which is recognizable in that hermeneutical discussion.

In Montreal 1963 the acknowledged principle of Scripture which until then had been, at least, formally acknowledged, (cf. the enlarged Basis of the WCC in 1961) was replaced by a principle of tradition. Moreover, in Bristol 1967 there was the full breakthrough of the secular/ historical approach to the Bible. As a result of this two-fold cessation of the principle of Scripture there was uncertainty about the source and norm of the truth of the church. Presupposed given authority in any form generally met a crisis in those years.

In ecumenical theology there emerged what we can name an empiric-theological principle of Situation. Anything could be acknowledged as authoritative now (from whatever religious source, Christian, secular or foreign, it came). Whatever in the socio-political or religious cultural 'context' (in which God was said to be acting salvationally¹⁶) is experienced as authority is acknowledged. Further, it must be acknowledged for at this stage planned and controlled tradition processes are clearly recognizable.

For example the pattern of 'contextual theologies' from quite different parts of the earth (which have suddenly emerged everywhere since the seventies)¹⁷ resemble each other in their structure and in their underlying 'ideology' in a striking way. From a distance they seem to be more strategically spread imports from outside than really indigenous theologies.

More openly recognizable, there are working traditions and reception p. 184 processes inside the WCC member churches, as e.g. the Faith and Order studies on 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry' (BEM) (cf. e.g. the Lima document 1982), on 'Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today', or on 'The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community'. Or the study programme started in the churches in 1983 by the WCC Sub-unit on 'Dialogue with People of Living Faiths' entitled 'My Neighbour's Faith—and Mine: Theological Discoveries through (!) Interfaith Dialogue'. Or the study 'Community of Women and Men in the Church' (CWMC), recommending feminist theological views, started at the end of the seventies by the Sub-unit on Women in Church and Society. Not at least also the WCC activity is to be mentioned, 'to engage member churches in a conciliar process of mutual commitment (covenant) to justice, peace and the integrity of all creation' (JPIC) (started in Vancouver 1983; cf. also the convocation on 'Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation' held in Seoul, Korea, in March 1990).

As tradition founded in fact, now everything is handed down and (if everything works well) is received by the churches what in tenor is in harmony with the coining ecumenical spirit of the times as an ever shifting paradigm.

¹³ 'The Authority of the Bible', in: *Faith and Order, Louvain 1971, Study Reports and Documents, Faith and Order Paper No. 59* (Geneva: WCC, 1971), pp. 9–23; reproduced also in: *The Bible. Its Authority and Interpretation in the Ecumenical Movement, Faith and Order Paper No. 99*, ed. Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, (Geneva: WCC, 1980), pp. 42–57.

¹⁴ cf. 'The significance of the Old Testament in its Relation to the New', *The Bible. Its Authority and Interpretation in the Ecumenical Movement, Faith and Order Paper No. 99*, ed. Ellen Flesseman-van Leer (Geneva: WCC, 1980), pp. 58–76.

¹⁵ cf. Martin Hamel, *Bibel—Mission—Ökumen. Schriftverständnis und Schriftgebrauch in der neueren ökumenischen Missionstheologie*; (Basel: Gießen; BrunnenVerlag, 1993), pp. 26–39.

¹⁶ cf. loc. cit. pp. 40–42.

¹⁷ cf. loc. cit. pp. 115–150.

Scripture and the confessional traditions more or less determined by Scriptures are largely eliminated as standards because Scripture as well as those traditions themselves are re-interpreted by this novel ecumenical 'tradition'.

In this situation the Holy Scripture is no longer perceived and acknowledged in faith as the Word of God and as the sole authority and *norm* of all Christian cognition and doctrine but is relativised historically, sociologically, psychologically or in other ways and is supplemented or dominated by other authorities. Then things, both old and totally new can at pleasure be declared as legitimate tradition or be treated, in fact, as such.

As a result the historical distinction between orthodox and heretical is discarded. Such distinctions are now totally decided by the presently accepted new authorities.

It is very interesting to examine and to outline what inside the WCC today is in fact 'tradition', what is regarded as tradition there today and is propagated often very offensively and has become common property in the member churches and far beyond.¹⁸

Dr. Martin Hamel is a pastor of an Evangelical Lutheran Church at Bad Salzuflen, Germany.
p. 185

VIII

An Evangelical View of Scripture and Tradition

Paul G. Schrottenboer

INTRODUCTION

After considering the views of Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, the World Council of Churches and proceeding in the awareness of the onslaught upon both Scripture and tradition in the modern age, we should now delineate an evangelical view of Scripture and tradition.

Evangelicals have been as active as any in Christendom in engaging in tradition, but they have been less ready than many to reflect on this activity. We engage actively in handing on the faith once for all time entrusted to the people of God in preaching, theologizing, Bible study and in evangelism. But we often do not see the connection between these activities and our tradition.

Evangelicals are perhaps reluctant to acknowledge engagement in tradition because of their resistance to the elevation of tradition by others to an unwarranted level. We sense e.g., that to hold to the teaching of the church with the same level of 'reverence' as

¹⁸ This task can be done if one reads and analyzes e.g., the official Report of the Central Committee of the WCC to the Seventh Assembly of the World Council in Canberra 1991: *Vancouver to Canberra 1983–1990. Report of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches to the Seventh Assembly*, edited by Thomas F. Best (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990).

the teaching of Scripture (Council of Trent), is to detract from the unique authority of the sacred writings.

In their attitude to tradition, evangelicals have taken a position that in one respect is similar to that of the Enlightenment thinkers. The latter rejected tradition along with all claims to authority coming out of the past and inconsonant with human rationality. Evangelicals on their part rejected the authority of the past that conflicted with the higher authority of the biblical revelation.

We should not assume that we can draw a straight line from the NT writings to their message today and in effect ignore all that has happened in between. It is an illusion to think we have been largely unaffected by history with its forceful currents of modern thought.

We should openly recognize tradition in as far as it plays a formative role in which the Spirit of God has led the church to interpret the Scriptures and proclaim their message. When we in our evangelical tradition affirm that Scripture provides the norm for tradition we conclude that there is an ongoing interaction between Scripture and tradition, between the Word of God and the words of his people. Just what the nature of this interaction is we shall have to investigate.

Our aim then is to come to greater clarity on the relation of Scripture p. 186 and Tradition and to provide insight on our task in carrying on tradition. It is to hand down to our contemporaries, among them our offspring, the comprehensive story of creation, the fall into sin, redemption in Jesus Christ, the leading of the Spirit, the growth of the church and the impending consummation.

A key issue is how Scripture functions normatively in the tradition of the church. In searching for an answer we shall have to consider carefully how continuity and change are related, both in the history of redemption and in the history of the church. We should consider also the significance of the kingdom of God for tradition and what our task as evangelicals is with the Christian heritage.

This should be clear: There should be unity between the tradition of Scripture and our tradition. But unity does not mean parity. We submit to tradition as a *deposit* which functions normatively in our *activity* of handing on the tradition, that is, teaching the nations all that Christ commanded. Let us then first consider continuity and change.

CONTINUITY IN THE HISTORY OF REDEMPTION

The gospel was first published in paradise ([Gen. 3:15–17](#)) and, as John wrote, it is eternal ([Rev. 14:6](#)). The faith that was once for all time entrusted to the people of God is the unalterable deposit of truth ([Jude 3](#)). Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever ([Heb. 13:8](#)). Of God's kingdom there will be no end. Although heaven and earth disappear, the Word of Jesus Christ will not pass away.

These are the truths most assuredly believed among us. They are central and non-negotiable, for they are based on the *Magnalia Dei*, are revealed by the Spirit of God and are therefore a sacred trust to the church.

Tradition is not, as we all should know, something that originated in the New Testament age. It was already an integral part of the life of old Israel. The great deeds of God had to be told in succession from father to son ([Pss. 78, 105](#)). Moses built on the life of the Patriarchs. David united the nation of Israel, delivered by Moses from bondage, into one kingdom. The prophets constantly referred to and called Israel back to the law given by Moses and the promises articulated by David. Here was a living and growing tradition.

Nor did tradition commence in the Old Testament. That is itself a result of the tradition that preceded it. Even as the New Testament incorporated the *logia* that were then known

and reported orally concerning Jesus of Nazareth by the people of God, so also did the Old Testament. Just how that process was undertaken cannot be certainly stated, but we are sure that it did happen.

Let us begin by considering how in the mighty deeds of God the same relationship of continuity and change appears in his comprehensive plan of creation and redemption.

CONTINUITY OF CREATION AND REDEMPTION

If we would view continuity in God's plan rightly, then we should begin with the relation of his works of **P. 187** creation and redemption. Our help is in the name of the Lord who made the heavens and the earth. The Incarnate Word is the Eternal Word who made all things ([In. 1:1](#)). As the Word of the Seer on Patmos put it, he is worthy to receive glory and honour and power for he created all things ([Rev. 4:11](#)).

To put it in the fewest words: redemption is the restoration of creation for God will not forsake the work of his hands. Pentecost tells of the time of the restoration (*apokatataxis*) of all preceding events. Peter later wrote about the purification of the creation ([2 Pet. 3:10](#)) and the new heaven and the new earth, on which righteousness will dwell ([2 Pet. 3:13](#)). This, then, is the fundamental continuity within which whatever changes occur must take place.

As a coordinate of the creation/redemption/restoration relation, we note also the unity and continuity between the Word of God in his work of creation and the Word of God in his work of redemption. The word of God written refers repeatedly to the eternal creating word: 'By the word of the Lord were the heavens made and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth' ([Ps. 33:6](#)). The same written word refers to the creation-sustaining Word: 'Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. Your faithfulness continues through all generations; you established the earth, and it endures' ([Ps. 119:89-91](#)). The word to which the Psalmist refers here is not the inscripturated word, but that to which the inscripted word points. The Son of God upholds all things (including the Scriptures) by his powerful word ([Heb. 1:2](#)).

Here, then, is the bedrock of continuity: God's mighty acts of redemption reestablish what he did in creation. This means that the biblical norms for Christian living, given by God the Redeemer, are the very norms given by God the Creator. Scripture republishes and rearticulates with a redemptive update what God originally intended for humankind.

This means also that although the fall into sin corrupted men and women, and brought God's curse on their work and caused the whole creation to groan as in birth pangs ([Rom. 8](#)), the fall did not essentially change the plan of God for the creation, including his law for humankind. The law that is forever established in the heavens is holy and just and good. Like the gospel, it is eternal. True tradition builds upon this original creation word or law. Whatever else changes, this stands firm and sure.

GOD SHOWS THE WAY

However prominent the continuity, there is nothing static in God. His is a dynamic nature, one that is constantly marching on to fulfill his plans, including his expressed will for his people. In enjoining his people that they should not neglect narrating the great deeds of God from age to age, God was not instructing them to undertake a journey which he had not himself travelled. We cannot peer into the inner workings of the Godhead but we will do well to take heed to what Jesus said concerning that which the Father passed on to him and he in turn delivered to the Holy Spirit.

At a very difficult juncture both for himself and the disciples, near the [p. 188](#) end of his life on earth, Jesus explained the need for his coming sacrifice and for his departure from the earth and what it would mean for the disciples. It was then that he explained both how the word of the Father who sent him and the word of the Spirit whom he would send form a unity with his word and work. 'The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather it is the Father living in me, who is doing the works' ([Jn. 14:10](#)). Also, 'The Holy Spirit will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own, he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you' ([Jn. 16:13, 14](#)). Jesus the incarnate Word receives the message from his Father and conveys it to the Spirit. Jesus Christ is therefore the connecting link of revelation and is preeminently the Word of God. Here is the foundational unity in the plan and message of redemption and restoration. Jesus Christ who is the Word of God is God's unspeakable gift to humankind. There is, we may conclude, a fundamental unity and unchangeability in God's work.

Our evangelical theology has stressed the unchangeability of God and it has marshalled proof texts to demonstrate it. God is, we all agree, changeless in the sense that he is faithful. Because he changes not, the sons of Jacob need not fear that they will be destroyed ([Mal. 3:6](#)). Because the Father of light does not change like shifting shadows, we need not fear that we will not receive the good things from above ([Ja. 1:17](#)). Once God has given his word, it is settled.

We should, however, not think of the God who does not change as a great platinum bar that is impervious to all alterations in temperature and humidity and is therefore the standard for all weights and measures. His unchangeableness is always joined to his faithfulness.

The unchangeability of God's purpose is expressed by the Psalm writer: 'The plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purpose of his heart through all generations' ([Ps. 33:11](#)). Faithfulness in continuity is built into the economy of redemption. Actually we meet the idea of change only within the process of faithful continuity. Jesus expressed it with these words: 'Until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, nor the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished' ([Mt. 5:18](#)).

THE UNCHANGING GOD HAS INITIATED CHANGE

Unchanging faithfulness is one aspect of the plan of God. Another is that in the course of the ages, in executing his plan, God has made great and astounding changes in the economy of the redemption of his people and the creation.

The great new thing was the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ. While it is true that God is king forever, it is also true that in a most decisive sense his kingdom came with the advent of Christ and the great central events of redemption related to his sojourn on earth, his return to heaven and the outpouring of the Spirit. The law and the prophets were until John, said Jesus. Since that time the good news [p. 189](#) of the kingdom of God was being preached and everyone was forcing his way into it ([Lk. 16:16](#)). The law was given by Moses, grace and truth came by Jesus Christ ([Jn. 1:17](#)). From the days of John the Baptist the kingdom of God has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men laid hold of it ([Mt. 11:12](#)).

Of crucial importance in the coming of the kingdom was the transition from the old age to the new. The greatness in the plan of redemption came to expression in the law given by Moses, which was fulfilled in Jesus Christ who is the end of the law, not just in a ceremonial sense but as a way to strive to attain salvation to everyone who believes ([Rom.](#)

[10:4](#)). The change came also in the sacraments: circumcision which had through misuse become a symbol of work righteousness now had to give way to faith. If one was circumcised, Christ would profit him nothing ([Gal. 2:21](#)). This was a far cry from the time when whoever was not circumcised was cut off from Israel.

The changes brought about in the coming of the kingdom became very clear in the cleansing of meats and in the admission of gentiles into the new fellowship. Jesus had made the change known already during his ministry on earth. In his discussion with the Pharisees about clean and unclean food he stated that it is not what goes into the stomach that can make one unclean. It is rather what comes out of the person that makes him or her unclean. Mark sensed the significance of the teaching of Jesus and adds the comment: 'In saying this Jesus declared all foods clean' ([Mk. 7:19](#)).

The apostle Paul builds on the same theme of the great change in God's plan as he reflects on the wisdom hidden in ages past and now revealed to the church. It was a wisdom that had been hidden but was destined to be revealed in that time ([1 Cor. 2:7](#)). Formerly the people of God were limited to the children of Israel. Now they would be a world wide communion. For support Paul refers to [Isaiah 64:4](#) 'No eye has seen/no ear has heard, no mind has conceived/what God has prepared for those who love him' ([1 Cor. 2:9](#)). This passage has been used as proof of the great glory that will come in the age to come. But the apostle's reference was to the great advance that had already arrived in the economy of redemption when Christ became incarnate, finished his work and the Holy Spirit came to dwell in the church.

CHANGES IN THE CHURCH IN THE APOSTOLIC AGE

The teaching of Jesus concerning the new age had at that time not, however, yet penetrated the understanding of the apostle Peter. He had to learn the lesson later when he was in Joppa. The revelation came to him in the form of a vision at a crucial turning point in the ministry of the apostles. It concerned whether the gentiles would be given the gospel on the same basis as it was given to the Jews. In the vision of the sheet let down from heaven, with all kinds of clean and unclean animals, Peter refused to eat as he was commanded, for he had never done so in his life. But his objection was brushed aside when the voice from heaven said: 'Do not call impure that God has made clean' ([Ac. 10:14](#)). P. 190

This experience of Peter became decisive at the assembly shortly afterwards in Jerusalem where Peter recounted the event and related how the Holy Spirit had fallen on all the believers, including the gentiles.

In the assembly in Jerusalem the issue had to be faced head on. Would the gentile converts be required to submit to circumcision? (Truly a question as weighty as that of clean and unclean food!) Or would the Jews be required to relinquish this holy ordinance of God? Here was a classic question of continuity and change.

The issues at that assembly concerned both the basis of salvation and regulations requiring a unifying life style. The decision of the church at that early time indicated that they knew where to draw the line between on the one hand what might not be altered and remained the same from the old dispensation to the new, namely that salvation is through the grace of Jesus Christ (v. [11](#)) and on the other hand that which should be changed for the sake of the unity of the people of God. The proof for that which remained constant, Peter made plain, was that the Holy Spirit was given to the gentiles as well as to the Jews. It was also sensed that something must be asked of the gentile Christians, for the time being, as a concession to the Jewish Christians. In order to maintain the unity of God's plan for the redemption of his people, circumcision might not be demanded, but refraining

from meat that was bloody, from food offered to idols and from sexual looseness was required of the gentiles for the unity of the Body of Christ ([Ac. 15:1-21](#)).

With this decision that assembly maintained the fundamental continuity in salvation. Even though this was difficult for the tradition-honouring Jews to accept, circumcision was not demanded of the gentiles, At the same time the assembly urged the gentile Christians (although that was not easy for them) not to offend the Jews who read the law of Moses every sabbath. After the decision was made they all said, 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.' It is interesting to note that Jewish Christians do not today read the law every sabbath day in the synagogue. Nor is the restriction on food generally adhered to by Christian gentiles. On both counts there was probably a period of transition. It is safe to conclude that the injunction was for the time being.

It is interesting to note that the apostle Paul did not rigidly follow the decision of the church in Jerusalem either as regards food or circumcision. As for the case of food he stated to the church in Corinth, 'food does not bring us near to God, we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do' ([1 Cor. 8:8](#)).

In regard to circumcision he could in one instance determine that Timothy should be circumcised ([Ac. 16:3](#)) and at another time state that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love ([Gal. 5:6](#)).

Here in the apostolic church we have a normative model for us today: continuity in the essentials; flexibility and change in the non-essentials when the unity of the church is at stake. Not the continuity of change but change within continuity should be our motto. p.

191

TRADITION AS A TASK

It will appear that tradition, such as the deposit of faith, is a task for God's people. It was that in the time of the OT dispensation and, as Jesus taught, it is a task as well for his people in the new age. It is interesting to note that in the parable of the talent the servants were asked to trade (*paredokin*) with the gifts they received and to give an account to the Master ([Mt. 25:14](#)). They had to make tradition with the gifts entrusted to them. Preeminent among these gifts is the gospel itself.

The entire gospel is tradition, Herman Ridderbos in his very helpful book on the *Authority of the New Testament* points to the fact that, together with the terms *didache* and *kerygma* the term *paradosis* describes the entirety of the New Testament message. The Good News is that which has been delivered from God to the writers and they have passed it on to the New Testament church which in turn has the obligation today to pass it on to the generations following.

The close association between tradition and trading suggests that there is something dynamic in tradition. Growth is built into the process. And that is true both in the sense that God caused the tradition to grow and that he gave to his people the task to trade on the tradition, to make it richer. Again, this involves change.

We recall the word of Jesus when, after he had completed a long series of parables recorded in [Matthew 13](#), he said: 'Every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of God is like the owner of the house who brings out of the store-room new treasures as well as old' (v. [52](#)).

Prior to the task was the gift of the gospel tradition. We acknowledge this gift when we affirm that whether we live or die, we are the Lord's, that there is nothing that can separated us from his love. That we are more than conquerors through Jesus Christ who loves us. That our only comfort in life and in death is that we belong to him body and soul.

These truths are not dependent on our perceptions; our perceptions are, or should be, dependent on them.

NORM FOR THE CHURCH IN HISTORY

The point that Peter had to learn in Joppa was to keep in step with God as his truth went marching on. And as with Peter, so with the entire church: it had to let go of old ordinances in order to be able to profit from the blessings of the new which far surpass those of the old.

From a consideration of continuity and change in the history of redemption as that is indicated in the Scripture we turn to the relation of change and continuity in the life of God's people in the post-apostolic age. Here we find that tradition involves both necessary retention of revealed truth and unavoidable advance in understanding and application.

For a biblical perspective on continuity and change, we should distinguish clearly between that which cannot be altered without disastrous results and that which must change if we are to be faithful servants of the Lord. There can be no fruitful change p. 192 if there is not first faithful continuity. And if there is to be faithful continuity there must be fruitful change.

We are obviously confronted here with the problem of staying on course while we strike out on new paths, of contending for the faith once delivered as we search for new meaning in the sacred deposit for the living of these days.

CHRISTIAN TRADITION AND THE UNITY OF GOD'S PEOPLE

The dual character of tradition as gift and calling appears clearly in the teaching about the unity of the church of Jesus Christ. There is a fundamental identity of God's people. We are united in faith with all who call upon the name of Jesus in truth and place their trust in him for this life and for the life to come ([1 Cor. 1:2](#)). Our membership is in that fellowship of those who are called out of the whole human race to be a church to the living God. It is of that church that we are and ever will remain living members; it is the universal fellowship of faith. Our union with Christ and our belonging to the one holy catholic and apostolic church constitute our fundamental identity and unity as people of God.

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, chapter [3](#), Paul speaks of the only foundation (the gift) and of our building on that foundation (the task). The tensions that arise in the context of continuity and change are closely related to the distinction between the foundation which remains the same and our act of building upon it, which results in continuing change. It is in reference to the building that we do on the one foundation that the apostle says: 'be careful how you build'. Some of the work will last; some of it will be destroyed. Some traditions must continue; others should be left behind.

The apostles clearly set before the early church the responsibility to mark the limits of allowable differences in the church of Jesus. The Body of Christ is not a free debating society in which all resolutions may be proposed for discussion good and bad. The church needs its confessional standards. The church must hold firmly to the 'sound doctrine' of the apostles. It needs a tradition to which it can heartily subscribe and which it desires to pass on.

From the days of the first century the church has been faced with the question concerning how much difference can and should be tolerated in the church. It rejected Gnosticism which downgraded the body and proclaimed a new way of salvation, through esoteric knowledge. It also rejected Montanism with its faulty view of revelation and Arianism which denied the equality of the Son with the Father.

The apostle Paul stressed the need for unity in regard to the unsearchable love of God in his letter to the Ephesians (3:13) where he pleaded for deeper understanding. He also pleaded for consensus in his letter to Corinth, for all Christians should be of the same mind and all should say the same thing (1 Cor. 1:10). It is no small order to attain and honour the required measure of consensus.

We are at times hampered from following the injunction of the apostle by our myopic perspective, allowing the denomination or fellowship p. 193 with which we are affiliated to partially eclipse the *una sancta*. We are reluctant to consider seriously what other communions are saying. We tend to be satisfied to talk only with like minded people of our own heritage. Even then, among ourselves, we fail to reach consensus because of our impatience and our excessive self assurance. When our eyes become myopic we limit the Christian tradition and lose much of its richness.

OUR TASK IN A CHANGING, DIVERSE CHURCH

We have referred to the dynamic initiative in God's plan of restoration for the creation and the task he has given to his people. This is vividly expressed in the saying of Jesus about new wine in new wine skins. He was referring to a truth that was commonly accepted. Every wine maker knew what he meant: new fermenting wine breaks old skins.

The coming of the kingdom is the new wine and requires new containers, new structures, new traditions. What is more, the task of God's people is to provide the new skins so that the dynamic power of the new wine of the kingdom is not lost (9:14-17).

We have mentioned also that there is need to distinguish clearly between our fundamental unity in Christ in the fellowship with the universal church and our fellowship as evangelicals. Unless we keep this distinction constantly in mind, much of what we say about continuity and change will not have the desired effect. Bearing this in mind, let us look at a number of aspects of the task we face in obeying Scripture and evaluating tradition.

1. Recognize the tentativeness of our response to the gospel

It was held by some of the first generation Reformers that the command of Jesus to proclaim the gospel to all nations was given exclusively to the apostles and did not place a responsibility upon the post apostolic church to engage in cross cultural evangelism. Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676) was the first Reformed missiologist to teach that the so-called great commission is for every age.

Today evangelicals are engaged in cross cultural and cross national missions around the world. We sense that some of the early Reformers were mistaken in this regard and we have made a correction.

It is well known that official Roman Catholic teaching is that when the Pope speaks *ex cathedra* in matters of faith and morals, he speaks infallibly. If a catholic theologian publicly rejects this teaching, he may expect the treatment that Hans Kung received.

There is a more excellent way. It begins with the recognition of the tentativeness of even our best and time-tested formularies and practices. From this no church council or church official is exempt. It is expressed in the words *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est*. The churches that are reformed must be reforming. Eternal truth must be expressed in new ways.

2. Exercise greater criticism of ourselves and of our fathers

As evangelicals who think that we have had to avoid many pitfalls, self [p. 194](#) criticism is not an easy task. Yet it follows directly from the tentativeness of our position. Frankly it poses a problem that we should not overlook. It puts us in a kind of dilemma.

On the one hand we seem to have no choice but to claim that we are right, for we are bound by the very nature of things to maintain our own perspective. We cannot adopt the views of others unless we first take them over as our own and then we still see them from the vantage point of where we ourselves stand—only now in a new position.

On the other hand if we say that other people and other churches have equal right to their views and then consider all convictions as on a par, we may land in a kind of relativism in which all cats appear grey. This kind of pluralism we should avoid like the plague. (The very claim that all views are relative assumes absolute validity for itself, and is self-destructive.) Let us look at the biblical message for help out of this dilemma.

There are two assessments in the New Testament of our knowledge as believers which stand in apparent mutual tension: we know only in part ([1 Cor. 13:12](#)) and, since we have an anointing from the Holy Spirit, we all know the truth ([1 Jn. 2:20, 21](#)). Rather than choose the one to the exclusion of the other, we hold that only by maintaining the apparent paradox can we avoid the pitfalls of the pride of possession and the unease of uncertainty. Rather than conclude that both assessments given in the apostolic witness cannot be right, we should seek to understand what they mean and hopefully find that both are valid.

We do have knowledge through God's anointing grace and our acceptance of God's revelation; at the same time our knowledge is incomplete and our understanding is not free from error; it is *Stukwerk*, fragmentary. We know only in part ([1 Cor. 13:12](#)). Yet everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God ([1 Jn. 4:7](#)).

If we stress only the incompleteness of our knowledge we may veer in the direction of making all our confessions but feeble, nearly worthless efforts to express what is beyond human understanding and reliable information. If we emphasize solely the certainty of our knowledge and apply this idea to our entire church standards, our church order and even our generally accepted theology, but do not sense that this knowledge is centred in and grounded on the truth in Jesus Christ, we may think that we are the blessed possessors. In fact, we can do no more than touch the hem of the garment of truth. Yet even the touch of the garment can save.

3. Seek the guidance of the Spirit

We should not at this point be left in a vacuum, an uncertainty as to where we are and what we may expect. For we have the promise of the Saviour that he would send the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit who would lead the church into all the truth. This promise came to its first great fulfillment at Pentecost and in the writing of the New Testament Canon. The great difference which the outpouring of the Spirit produced may be seen in comparing Peter's earlier and at times inane understanding of the word of Jesus and his [p. 195](#) profound insight at the outpouring of the Spirit in Jerusalem. Now he had the truth-understanding Spirit. But even then, it did not happen apart from the Joppa jolt.

We make a mistake, however, if we limit this illuminating work of the Spirit to the apostles in the early church. It is an ongoing activity for the church, one that builds always on the deposit of faith entrusted to the people of God, enabling them to take from the storeroom of the kingdom of God treasures old and new. The need to seek the guidance of the Spirit is given in the very nature of biblical authority.

All Scripture is authoritative but not all Scripture is universally normative, at least not in the same way. Many laws apply in a full sense in every age, such as those against killing, stealing and bearing false witness.

Many New Testament injunctions address situations that are foreign to us. Many are tied to the cultural setting, such as the holy kiss, foot washing and anointing with oil. These were ways to show love to neighbour and approach to God but are in themselves not binding on all. We are of course under obligation to show the same attitude as these displayed at that time. We need to find culturally fitting ways to do the same thing today as the Christians did then.

Nowhere does the dual character of tradition as being both a gift and a task appear more clearly than it does in what is called a gift of the Spirit to engage in spiritual discernment. In his second letter to Timothy the apostle Paul exhorted him to 'fan into flame' the gift that was given him ([1:6](#)). Spiritual discernment is one of the gifts that must be cultivated. It is a gift that is especially important in all such issues for which there are no specific indications for action in the Scriptures.

In all such instances there is need to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and to rely on him to see us through. We may not often be able to say with the assembly in Jerusalem that our decision is good to the Holy Spirit and to us, but that should be the goal of our striving. We must lay hold on the promises of God that his Spirit will lead us into the truth.

Spiritual discernment is needed, for example, to distinguish between what in the Bible is an illustration of a basic norm and the norm itself, between what is culturally conditioned and what transcends time and culture. Discernment is needed to determine whether the difference in view concerning the place of women in the church is due to a difference in interpretation or whether opening the office to women constitutes a violation of a biblical norm. Whether the difference in the practice of baptism, to adults only or also to infants, is a church-divisive issue.

True discernment is a sign of Christian maturity which has come to the people of God at Pentecost. It was there that God's people entered into the age of maturity. Here again we may speak of both a gift and a task.

The gift of spiritual maturity is the ability to discern good from evil ([Heb. 5:14](#)). Mature people are able to eat solid food, while milk is for babes (see also [Col. 1:9-11](#); [Eph. 5:10-11](#); [Phil. 1:9-11](#)). That spiritual discernment is a calling is poignantly expressed in the appeal of Paul to the church in Thessalonika not 'to [p.196](#) put out the Spirit's fire' ([1 Thess. 5:19](#)).

The task of exercising spiritual maturity is expressed again in [Romans 12:1-2](#). God's people need to be transformed by the renewal of their minds so that they may prove, test, what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God. One should note that the word for test (*dokimadzo*) is the same as is used in the parable of the man who would first prove a team of oxen before he would follow Jesus.

In exercising maturity we need a certain latitude of freedom. It is worthy of note that in connection with his example of the minor child who comes of age, the apostle Paul exhorts the Galatian Christians to stand firm in the freedom with which Christ has made them free. They must not be hemmed in by a long list of do's and don'ts ([Gal. 5:1](#)). But as Peter admonished, they must not use their liberty as a cloak of wickedness but as children of God ([1 Pet. 2:16](#)). We must avoid the dangers of both legalism and arbitrariness, of taking all biblical injunctions literally and assuming that we may pick and choose at will.

Maturity in discernment is needed in regard to the changes that face us in a number of other areas. We must distinguish between the historical/ cultural component of many biblical commands and the underlying abiding norm. Some injunctions have lost their force because of the onward march in the salvation/ historical development. Here we might mention the many ceremonial laws and aspects of the civil law. Other injunctions, when given, were rooted in the cultural form of the age. If the original intention is to be

carried out in a new cultural situation, in order to make it effective, significant changes must be made in the form.

When there is a difference in view concerning issues in the church, such as the place of women in church office, we need to discern whether this is a difference in interpretation of Scripture or whether it reveals a different attitude to the authority of Scripture.

Ponder anew how Scripture should function authoritatively in our evangelical traditions.

In the introduction to this study we mentioned that tradition necessarily involves interpretation. We did not, however, indicate what the key to that interpretation should be. That issue should still be addressed.

We recall that in the analysis of the views of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, we noted that the Commission recognized that Scripture and interpretation are inseparable. The Faith and Order report listed a number of ways in which Scripture is interpreted in the churches but made no choice between them. We sense that this way to conclude the discussion is not satisfactory.

Evangelicals, no less than others, face the question of interpretation. And with us, also, there is no full agreement as to what the key to the interpretation of Scripture is. Some evangelicals stress different dispensations in the history of redemption. Others emphasize justification by faith, others the coming of the kingdom. Must we also be satisfied with a list or can we propose a way in which our interpretation of tradition p. 197 is in line with the Scriptures? Rather than acquiesce to the differences, we should try harder to reach agreement.

As evangelicals our concern is to be true to the evangel, the gospel which we seek to proclaim to the people of the world. We are convinced that the norm for all our traditions, including those which we hand on to the generations following, should be in accord with the Christian Scriptures. What does that imply for our interpretation of Scripture? Is there a normative biblical tradition of the interpretation of Scripture that we should at all costs maintain? And if there is such an interpretive key, are we able to describe it satisfactorily?

We would all be uneasy if we left the impression that while the Scriptures are normative for faith and life, they leave the question of the interpretation of Scripture entirely open to human discretion. Let us therefore consider the following pointers toward a biblical interpretation of biblical tradition and the traditions of the church.

1. Fundamental to interpretation of the Bible is an attitude of submission to the Word of God given in the Scriptures. It asks of us that we bring every thought captive to Jesus Christ ([2 Cor. 10:5](#)). He therefore in a very real sense is the key to the understanding of the Scriptures which bear testimony to him ([Jn. 5:39](#)).

2. Scripture should be considered its own interpreter. The assumption is that the Scriptures as a whole form a unity in God's revelation to humankind. As a whole they bear testimony to Jesus Christ.

3. While the Scriptures present wholly reliable truth, our understanding of its truth is not free from error. While holding the fully authoritative Word of God written, we should recognize the tentativeness of our formulations of this truth. This means that we simply cannot establish an infallible key to the interpretation of Scripture and tradition. That would be tantamount to placing our views on a par with the Bible itself. The operative keys we use, as use them we must, are always open to correction. It also means that we should be open to dialogue on this important issue.

We have been made aware that we cannot ignore the traditions of other ecclesial communions, nor need we accept them wholesale. In communion with all the saints we

should seek to be true to the gospel as we know it, discerning between what is good and evil in the many Christian traditions.

4. In their understanding of the Scriptures, the Reformers stressed the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. It is when this internal testimony convinces us of the truth of the 'external' testimony, that is the Scriptures that we truly know the truth. In his first letter the apostle John simply states that we all know the truth. We are not left in uncertainty.

5. The tentativeness of our theological description of the key to the Scriptures should not move us to question the certainty of our knowledge of faith. The provisional character of our theories should however spur us on to seek for ever better formulations of the way in which we interpret the Bible. [p. 198](#)

CONCLUSION

We recall the message of Moses to the people of Israel when they were about to enter the Promised Land and live in a greatly changed circumstance. God's people, said Moses, should *remember* the mighty liberating deeds of God, and they should live in the great *expectation* of his future blessings in the land of promise. In their remembering they would stress the continuity, in their expectation they were called to live obediently before God in the pregnant situation. For this they must *take heed* that none of the commands of the Lord were forgotten.

One final thought: In continuity and change in the church we have a task, an on-going, unending task. It will be with us until the end of the age. We should not run ahead of God, nor should we lag behind, but keep in step. His truth is marching on. But the task we have is secondhand. What is primary is the gift of God. He will preserve the church. We need not and we may not despair for even the forces that proceed from the gates of hell cannot prevail over the people of God. [p. 199](#)

Epilogue

We have surveyed the various ways in which the relationship between Scripture and tradition is viewed. From the essays, there are several questions that need to be answered by evangelicals as they interact with other traditions and seek to understand where their own history has led them.

1. What is the role of the community of faith in defining tradition?
2. When does adherence to a tradition, e.g. the Amish in Bray's essay, negate the intent of the tradition?
3. What mechanisms can be used to examine traditions for their congruence to Scripture?
4. How do we guard against even good traditions becoming empty forms?
5. In what ways are the warnings against false traditions and the commendations of trustworthy tradition we find in the Bible to be applied to the church's life today?
6. How would you envisage the task that we, as evangelicals, have in both our local settings and in the world wide church in relating to Christians of other traditions?

7. If we give due attention both to the literary form in which portions of Scriptures were written (psalms, prophetic, historical, wisdom literature, letters, apocalyptic) and to the full authority of the canonical writings, to what extent can we accept the results advocated in the study of biblical traditions?

8. On many issues divergences in interpreting Scripture present no problems, e.g. dress codes, worship patterns, church organizational structure. Some matters of interpretation set policy for an entire community, e.g., ordination of women or remarriage after divorce. What process is involved in coming to conclusions on such matters? Who decides? What is the role of tradition? How is this basically different from the Roman Catholic process where the Pope, together with the Bishops, makes the final decisions?

However, we are not only able to raise questions but our study leads us to draw the following conclusions which we hope will advance the interchange.

1. Tradition is *communal*, not individual. It is produced by ethnic groups and by denominations. An individual person may have his/her peculiarities, but only when they are [p. 200](#) shared by a group can they become a tradition. Tradition is part of human culture.

2. Tradition is *historical*. A group of people may establish their teaching and values but only if they are passed on and taken over do they become a tradition.

3. Tradition is related to the tension between *continuity and change*. It can initiate change and it can retard change. It can function as a shackle to prevent taking over new beneficial practices, and it can become a deterrent to accepting harmful practices.

4. Authentic tradition is *alive*. It is not like a stone in one's hand but a carryover into the present of life that which was lived in the past. If it works, you hardly notice that it is there. But it can become a lively and controversial topic.

5. Tradition *gives form* to social and ecclesiastical life, in short to life in its entirety. Abraham Kuyper made the comment that with our ecclesiastical traditions we wear paths through the landscape of Scripture along which people now travel.

6. Tradition is *normative*. It impinges with social force upon those who stand within it to make them abide by the rules. The nature of the normativity depends on the kind of tradition, on the nature of the group and on the content of tradition. Social traditions entail social norms. Biblical tradition is normative in its nature. Church tradition is normative to the extent that it faithfully carries on the intent of Scripture.

7. Biblical tradition is *revelational*. It relates both to the redemptive acts of God in the history of salvation and to the prophetic word that accompanies and explains these redemptive acts.

8. Tradition necessarily involves *interpretation*. Ecclesiastical tradition in the church is comprised of such doctrines, mores, and emphases which the church understands the Scriptures to require. Creeds, dogmas, Bible outlines, sermons are all forms of tradition. Biblical tradition also requires interpretation. Essential is the mind set that willingly seeks to 'take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ' ([2 Cor. 10:5](#)). [p. 201](#)

Book Reviews

IRENÆUS ON THE SALVATION OF THE UNEVANGELIZED

by Terrance L. Tiessen

(Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press and Folkestone, Kent: Shelving, 1993
ATLA Monograph Series, No. 31 ISBN 0 8108 2682 8)

(Reviewed by David Parker)

Despite its detailed scholarship, this study of Irenaeus by the Professor of Theological Studies at Providence College and Seminary, Manitoba, Canada is somewhat disappointing. The main reason for this is the negative nature of its thesis—that Irenaeus cannot be claimed as a second century precursor of Karl Rahner's theology of 'anonymous Christianity' as some have declared. To reach this conclusion, Tiessen has undertaken a comprehensive exposition of Irenaeus's theology, with special attention to such issues as the part played by each person of the Trinity in revelation, the church as the recipient, preserver and proclaimer of revelation and the human response to revelation. He has found that the content and structure of Irenaeus's theology provides little opportunity for thinking that he supported the idea that people who had no explicit knowledge of Christ's grace could be saved. On the contrary, he concludes that Irenaeus links salvation closely with the institutional church as the vehicle of the gospel in the present era. He finds that salvation always involves a conscious response to the revelation of the Word in whatever one of its varied forms it may have been encountered; without this explicit faith as a response to the church's evangelistic outreach, 'people in other religions are going to be lost'. Thus, as Tiessen notes, Irenaeus's overall position is in fact the one that 'has traditionally motivated Christian missions'. (p. 280)

Tiessen points out that Irenaeus' theology was strongly focused on refuting Gnosticism which gave it its distinctive form. He also explains that, contrary to those advocating 'anonymous Christianity', Irenaeus did not have in mind a situation where non-Christians had no access to the gospel message. But Tiessen argues from the content and nature of Irenaeus's theology that there is little scope for believing Irenaeus would have come to a different [p. 202](#) conclusion in another context. However, he does concede that Irenaeus 'might' have allowed for 'the salvation of individuals outside of the institutional Church' (p. 281) because of three factors: the possibility that the revelation of the Word which has occurred in many modes is in some way salvific; Irenaeus' soteriology, including the theology of recapitulation and the idea of 'a cosmic cross', may have some implications for the solidarity of the human race; the millennium may be the eschatological opportunity for the unevangelized to gain knowledge of God. However, Tiessen does not give much credence to these points, preferring to regard them as pointers to 'our ignorance of what Irenaeus himself would have said in a different context from the one in which he actually wrote' (p. 282).

This raises another difficulty with the book. Emphasizing from the beginning the great difference between the context of its subject and the present-day issue to which it relates, the author cautions continually about the danger of drawing unwarranted conclusions. In the final chapter he engages in some discussion of the relative virtues of either drawing inferences from Irenaeus's theology or of developing his theology in ways that would relate more directly to the present concerns about pluralism. However, he draws a negative conclusion, generally disallowing both alternatives on grounds of content and theological procedures, thus reinforcing the inconclusive nature of the result. This discussion does, however, raise in sharp focus the important issue of the extent to which it is legitimate to transpose the insights of important and influential figures such as Irenaeus to another period of time.

A final reason for difficulty with this work arises from its nature as the study of a particular individual's theology. Such a study necessarily involves long sections paraphrasing the subject's writing. It is only in the final chapter that much analysis takes

place, and in many cases treatment of major issues, such as Irenaeus's theology of recapitulation, are tantalizingly brief. Furthermore, the problem is intensified by the fact that Tiessen opens the book with an extremely condensed summary of Rahner's intricate theory of 'anonymous Christianity', which does not make for an attractive introduction to the work.

Tiessen often provides extended quotations from Irenaeus in his own translation, mostly with the original Latin text printed in footnotes. Furthermore, he frequently engages in detailed discussion with other authorities on points of translation and interpretation, necessitating many notes; in two cases a full page is devoted to notes! These aspects of the book certainly provide plenty of material for further study and invite response from specialists in the area, but they tend to make its argument less accessible to the general reader. However, there is helpful repetition of the main themes and the findings are summed up admirably in the conclusion. There is also an extensive, classified bibliography.

Nevertheless, this is a valuable study in its own right, setting out as it does Irenaeus' robust soteriology in its historical and ecclesiastical context. In doing so, Tiessen, who p. 203 taught for 16 years at Asia Theological Seminary, Manila and holds a PhD from Ateneo de Manila University, has offered a commendable sample of the type of painstaking work that needs to be done to check the often all too facile assumptions of theological innovators and to provide the firm foundations needed for an informed and comprehensive evangelical theology today. Unfortunately, the unrealistically high price (US\$39.50) will limit the circulation of this volume.

EMERGING VOICES IN GLOBAL THEOLOGY

by William A. Dymess (Editor)

(Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994, Pb 255pp., ISBN 0 310 60461 3)

(Reviewed by David Parker)

Dyrness' latest volume, a sampler of theology from around the world, is a useful if not compelling complement to his earlier *Learning about theology from the third world* (Zondervan, 1990). Drawing upon international insights and connections gained through his times of teaching in Manila and Kenya, the dean of the School of Theology at Fuller has made a somewhat personal choice of nine articles from Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America to show the variety of theological work taking place in the non-Western world.

Even though so few in number, these essays reflect a remarkable range of style and content. Perhaps the most philosophical is Miroslav Volf's reflection on the meaning of events in his homeland, the former Yugoslavia, in terms of exclusion and otherness. The simplest and yet amongst the most powerful chapters are the narrative-style accounts of events in South Africa (Tony Balcomb) and the Philippines (Evelyn Miranda-Feliciano).

Undoubtedly the most thought-provoking and creative are the attempts by Kwame Bediako (Nigeria) and Cyril Okorocha (Ghana) to understand Christology and soteriology in terms of their own cultures.

From the other side of the world, Antonio Carlos Barro offers a history of Protestant theology in Latin America which helpfully explains its present contours, while Samuel Escobar takes a somewhat narrower focus in his essay on 'The search for missiological Christology.'

The most general contribution comes from India's Ken Gnanakan who discussed ecology and creation, while David Lira of the Philippines takes up an unexpected topic—a critique of evangelicalism in the United States.

As the editor indicates, there is little in the way of a cohesive theme in this book; however, he believes the chapters are held together by their common attention to missiological concerns, their 'tendency to reflect more closely on our relation to the earth, the processes of nature and related issues of poverty' and their attention to the historical context of the church. To put it in other words, they reflect the effort of the writers to move on from the expressions of Christianity that came to their regions with the founding of the church as they seek to relate the gospel to their own culture and [p. 204](#) society. The result is a collection of essays which amply illustrate the vitality and variety of evangelical thinking around the world and the importance of the task of developing a theology relevant to local concerns. However, while there is undoubtedly support for Dyrness's contention that these samples stand in contrast with typical examples of Western theology, yet his choice of some essays is puzzling.

For example, take David Lira's essay. It is the work of a very capable scholar from a multi-cultural Asian background who nevertheless 'self-consciously recognizes that he writes as a westernized Asian evangelical'. His contribution, which emanates originally from his participation in a 1986 American think-tank, is an interesting assessment of domestic American evangelicalism from the inside by a sympathetic participant. Although from the North American perspective, his observations may be described as 'prophetic' (as the editor puts it), they are made within the framework of his westernised worldview, and therefore do not seem to bring with them any of the rich insights that would otherwise be expected from someone with the author's background, energy and learning.

It is then perhaps no accident that the illustration on the cover of this book shows a globe turned to focus on Europe and the old world!

If the deepening of theological understanding through historical and cultural contextualization is the important issue, then the final essay shows just how much work is still needed. In explaining the development of Protestant theology in Latin America, Barro shows how one trend after another reacted to its predecessor—so that whatever direction the Roman Catholics took, Protestants were bound to oppose it; evangelicals took the opposite course to ecumenicals, and fundamentalists reacted similarly to pentecostals.

Therefore, in creating a truly indigenous church, Barro emphasizes the need to break with the imported models and thinking. However, he draws attention to the complex polarization between some branches of the church and popular culture which leads him to conclude that the prospects for genuine contextualization are poor indeed. What is worse, there is a serious dichotomy between the church and its theologians: 'The theologians,' he reports, 'talk about the ideal church that they dream one day will come into being, and the real church already thinks and operates as if it had reached that stage. Here we have two roads that seldom cross despite all the efforts and impatience of the theologians.'

Dyrness has provided some worthwhile examples of the type of emerging global theology that will be needed to deal with this situation. Through his introductory and background essays he has emphasized the necessity of doing theology in a global context. After all, this is the pattern for most aspects of life in the global village and it is even more justifiable within the framework of God's universal kingdom.

Perhaps it is too early (or not even appropriate) to say where global theology is going. But Dyrness's call to overcome ethnocentricity through greater interaction between theologians can be readily endorsed. In [p. 205](#) addition to his suggestions about exchange of personnel, support for this journal and its publisher, the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission, can be mentioned as a worthwhile means of aiding this process.

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE FOR ALL IT'S WORTH (SECOND EDITION)

by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993, Pb., 265pp.)

(Reviewed by Greg A. Restall)

Fee and Stuart have updated their much-loved and much-used introduction to exegesis and hermeneutics for the lay person. This second edition is changed only a little from the first, so this review will simply sketch the contents for those who may not be familiar with the book, and then indicate the most important changes from the first edition.

Fee and Stuart give the interested layperson a clear introduction to the issues involved in biblical interpretation. Instead of focusing on the 'tools' and basing the work around 'methods' like form criticism and source criticism, they arrange discussion around the different genres of biblical literature.

They use this format to introduce methods and to illustrate their use. So, we first look at Epistles, which at first glance look like they need little in the way of hermeneutics. Fee and Stuart show how hermeneutical issues arise, and they give examples of how we might interpret and apply the epistles without falling into the trap of treating the epistles as simply written to twentieth century western Christians.

Many examples are provided with the discussion of each type of biblical literature, and the authors highlight useful principles arising out of these examples. The discussion is very practical, and readers are left in no doubt as to how exegetical and hermeneutical principles apply in practice.

There is perhaps a slight problem of bias—Fee and Stuart do not hold back from arguing for their own favoured interpretation of controversial passages, such as [1 Timothy 2:11–12](#), but this is outweighed by the fact that the readers are well equipped to go away and make up their own minds on the matter. The focus is on reading the biblical text in the way it was originally intended, and Fee and Stuart help readers ask questions of the text which are suited to the text under discussion—instead of imposing a foreign 'grid' on interpretation.

These discussions of biblical genres are sandwiched between an introductory chapter on biblical translations, and an appendix on commentaries. These are the most obvious changes since the previous edition. The translations now include the NRSV (which they recommend, with a few caveats) and the commentaries include recent works not available for discussion in the 1981 edition.

Who is the best audience for a book like this? Firstly, Fee and Stuart assume that the reader comes from a Western society, but this does not rule out the book's value for other [p. 206](#) Christians. Secondly, they also seem to assume that the readers will come from a conservative church background. They expect that readers will accept the Bible as authoritative, but that they might be tempted to a certain 'wooden literalism' in Bible-reading. But if used properly, the material presented will help overcome that problem, enabling readers to treat the Bible on its own terms. In short, it will open to them the authentic message of the Bible with the assistance of contemporary biblical sponsorship. This is a worthwhile aim and one which the authors have succeeded in achieving.

SHEPHERDING THE CHURCH INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

by Joseph M. Stowell

(Victor Books/SP Publications: Wheaton, 1994, Hb. 274 pp. ISBN 1 56476 240 8)

(Reviewed by David Parker)

In *Shepherding the Church into the 21st Century*, the author, who is president of Moody Bible Institute, focuses on spiritual and personal qualities which are essential for pastors if they are going to exercise effective leadership. With its positive approach to ministry and its dynamic tone, this volume is a welcome change to the many books currently available which diagnose the faults of the church and dwell on its organizational and sociological problems.

Based loosely on an exposition of [1 Tim. 4:12-17](#), Stowell's book covers a large range of relevant issues from the essence of the pastoral ministry to sermon construction, set against a realistic understanding of the nature of the church and its place in contemporary society. Even if sometimes a little too conventional, with perhaps too many personal illustrations and with male pastors always in mind, Stowell offers valuable insights, making this book useful reading for beginners and seasoned pastors alike.

WHO ARE THE EVANGELICALS? TRACING THE ROOTS OF TODAY MOVEMENTS

by Derek J. Tidball

(London: Marshall Pickering: 1994, Pb. 290 pp. Index. Bibliog. ISBN 0 551 02503 4)

(Reviewed by David Parker)

Derek Tidball has provided a useful, if not engaging, survey of the history, beliefs and practices of the evangelical movement in the British (perhaps even English) context (with several references to the American scene), thus making it suitable as an introduction for the outsider or novice. It successfully explains the crucial doctrines and identifies many of the key figures of the movement, although it is excessively hagio-graphic in some areas. Necessarily selective and written from the author's own perspective, this book is essentially historical in approach; despite a final, somewhat moralistic, chapter devoted to present and future needs, it does not adequately grapple with many of today's key issues, or reflect the dynamic that is found in evangelicalism worldwide. It is marred by some very unfortunate [p. 207](#) typographical errors, including 'Schofield Reference Bible' and 'Aemenianism.'

A SURVEY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT (3RD EDITION)

by Robert H. Gundry

(Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994, 'Hb. 495 pp. Indexes, Bibliog., Illus., ISBN 0 85363 600 7)

(Reviewed by David Parker)

Apart from a new, larger page layout, most changes in this new edition of Gundry's popular New Testament survey occur in the sections dealing with the gospels. Now each gospel receives considerably expanded treatment in a chapter to itself, replacing the old outmoded harmonistic approach and offering a far better coverage of the contents and key interpretative issues. Geared for beginners in particular, the strong points of this introduction are its continual reference to the text of the New Testament, its summary outlines, maps and diagrams and well-crafted coverage of background material. The bibliographies have been updated (but only minimally), and the same type of black and white illustrations appear; however, the treatment of the epistles, now only about one quarter of the volume, is barely adequate for a work of this kind, especially in comparison with the material on the gospels.