

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

Faith and Tradition

EUGENE R. FAIRWEATHER

I. THE ESSENTIAL ISSUE

ALL Christians will agree that the Scriptures, enshrining the Word which God in his self-revelation has spoken to man, occupy a unique place among the norms of Christian doctrine. But this agreement ends abruptly when we begin to discuss the context in which the biblical Word is given, apprehended and interpreted, and to investigate the relation of that Word to the other primary elements (if any) of the Christian Tradition. My basic thesis in this article is simply that our differing views of the structure of Tradition are related to—and indeed to some extent arise out of—divergent interpretations of the way in which God's saving self-communication touches man.

The question is usefully raised by the ancient description of the baptismal initiation of the Christian as *sacramentum fidei*,¹ since different explanations of the correlation of *fides* and *sacramentum* disclose differing attitudes towards the life of grace, and this fact helps to explain the divergence in our formulations of the Tradition by which that life is framed and supported. (1) For example, the baptismal "Sacrament of faith" may be seen as an expression of faith elicited from the believer by the proclamation of the Word. The Church, in which the Sacrament is performed, will then be the society of believers, which preaches the Word and fosters faith. In this perspective, Sacrament and Church alike are radically subordinated to the Word, proclaimed and consciously accepted. (2) Or perhaps the "Sacrament of faith" will be construed as an expression of the Church's faith, announcing itself to the individual believer by means of a visible word (*verbum visibile*). Here the Church, which celebrates the Sacrament, is the society constituted by the Word in its dual form of speech and sign. Sacrament and Church remain subordinated to the Word, though with clearer recognition of the essential function of both as instruments of God's saving truth. (3) Or again, the "Sacrament of faith," while including both these meanings, may be seen as essentially a mystery of new being and life, communicated as well as signified by the Sacraments. While the mystery which they represent is apprehended by faith and can be fulfilled in the Christian's life only insofar as he appropriates it by personal faith—since it is agreed that faith is the fundamental response to God's saving work—the Sacraments do much more than set forth the Word or awaken and express faith. The Word declares the mystery which is really communicated in the Sacrament, while the celebration of the Sacrament is fulfilled in the

1. Cf. Augustine, *Epist.* 98, 9–10 (*CSEL*, 34, 530ff.).

response of faith to the Word proclaimed. The Church itself is the community of grace and faith, in whose life and truth Christians participate. In a sense, then, Sacrament is subordinated to Church, and Word to Sacrament, but without any thought of making any one element a mere expression or aspect of another element.

The connexion of this summary (and doubtless incomplete) analysis with the problem of Tradition is a quite direct one. (1) Those who hold the first position will (at least in principle) accept no Tradition other than Scripture. They will accept Baptism as a witness to the Christian's faith and the Eucharist as the seal of fellowship among believers in Christ's redemption. They will admit the reality of God's calling through his Word to a ministry in the Church and the world. All these, however, will be expressions of the response of faith to the Word of grace, and essential Christian Tradition will have to do with the latter alone. (2) Exponents of the second view will also be essentially scripturalist in their interpretation of Tradition, even though they may lay greater emphasis on the revelatory character of certain biblically attested institutions. The "Sacraments of the Gospel," in particular, will be acknowledged as effective signs of God's goodwill towards his people, by which the Gospel of salvation is given concrete expression in the household of faith, while more may also be said of ministerial order and an appeal made to biblical fact and principle in support of a particular order. Nonetheless, the extra-biblical elements will be essentially dependent on the revelatory Word, and fundamental Tradition will be contained in the latter, and in other elements only as determined by the Word. (3) The third view of Tradition has often been badly formulated, thanks to the intrusion of ideas of a separate doctrinal "tradition," parallel to Scripture.² In essence, however, it is an assertion, bound up with a particular understanding of the life of faith, of the reciprocal dependence of Scripture and the other elements of Tradition. In this perspective, Scripture, Creed, Sacraments, Ministry, appear as a complex Tradition, enshrining the grace and truth, the being and word, of the incarnate Logos, for the achievement of man's salvation.

Writing from an Anglican standpoint—and therefore starting from the *third* suggested interpretation of the *sacramentum fidei*, which I understand to be the teaching of the historic formularies of the Church of England—I propose to elaborate the *third* view of Tradition, as implied in the basic pattern of Anglican teaching and practice. By way of clearing the ground, we should note that the classical Anglican position is not as simple as some casual readers of the sixth "Article of Religion" seem to think. It is true that, confronted with certain doctrinal distortions and with misleading formulations of this particular issue, the Church of England came down

2. Cf. Council of Trent, Sess. IV (Denzinger, 23rd ed., No. 783). For recent developments in the Roman Catholic conception of Tradition, cf. K. E. Skydsgaard, "Scripture and Tradition," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 9 (1956), 337-58.

heavily on the side of the Reformation against false traditions. At the same time, she retained the essential shape of the extra-biblical Tradition—at first, perhaps, largely on conservative and pragmatic grounds, but very soon with an awareness which pointed to a more adequate formulation of the whole question. If, then, Anglicans must still take seriously their vocation to testify to a reformed Catholicism against the unilateral and uncritical definitions of papal Catholicism, this witness will naturally take the form, not of a “protestant” repudiation of extra-biblical Tradition, but of a “catholic” defence of Tradition in its wholeness against Reformation negations as well as against that flight from Tradition which sometimes shows itself in modern Rome.

II. THE SHAPE OF TRADITION

So far, it may seem that a very large question has been begged. It may be true that our definition of the structure of Tradition will arise out of our conception and experience of the life of grace and faith. But need there really be *any* Tradition? Is Christianity not the religion of the Spirit, who leads believers into all truth? Is not reliance on traditional forms, whether they be biblical, credal, sacramental or ministerial, evidence of a “fundamentalist” lack of faith in the Spirit of Christ? The essential answer is simple. As long as Christianity is Christianity, it cannot break the links that bind it to the historical Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and the Head of the Church. The Church cannot surrender to a new “Montanism” which, in the name of spiritual enthusiasm, would cut through the essential dependence of Christian faith and life on the mighty acts once done and the Word once spoken.

“Scripturalists” and “traditionalists” are rightly in agreement on this fundamental principle of the validity of Tradition. At the same time, a one-sided emphasis on the Word and Scripture, like a preoccupation with extra-biblical *doctrinal* traditions, is more likely than a comprehensive doctrine of apostolic Tradition to lead to an anti-historical illuminism. A type of Christianity which thinks of Christian communion with and in God as embodied in the whole pattern of historical forms which emerges from the work of Christ and his apostles has a multiple link with primitive Tradition, lacking in other expressions of our religion. It is this fullest realization of the concept of Tradition that must now be outlined.

We may begin at the point of fullest agreement—namely, the Tradition of truth in Scripture, and the *primacy* of this biblical witness in our knowledge of God and his gracious acts—but we shall have to draw the line at any attempt to turn this acknowledgement of primacy into an assertion of the absolute *sufficiency* of Scripture even as a doctrinal norm. For one thing, the Creed has to be taken into account as a “key to the Scriptures,” to whose at least embryonic existence the Scriptures themselves bear wit-

ness. It is Scripture *and* the "rule of faith" (*regula fidei*) that constitute the primary *dogmatic* norm of Tradition.³ But more than this, in its origins the *regula fidei* is intimately associated with the *sacramentum fidei*, and it represents to us the indissoluble union of Sacrament and faith.⁴ Faith held according to this rule is the attitude of the Christian who lives in and by the mystery of the divine life, sacramentally bestowed. But this points to the "exegetical" significance, not only of the Creed, but also of the Church's sacramental Liturgy, in our apprehension of the Christian and Catholic sense of Scripture. This is not to say that the meaning of man's relation to God is not fully declared in Scripture, but it is to assert that certain extra-biblical aids are indispensable for the understanding of that meaning.

All this points to the Tradition of the means of grace as a second element in the *paradosis*. As far as their established place in the Church is concerned, the Sacraments rest on independent and correlative Tradition whose essential forms go back beyond the formulation of the Canon of biblical Tradition. As Dom Gregory Dix pointed out most effectively, this is conspicuously true of the "shape" of the eucharistic Liturgy.⁵ But this is precisely what we should expect, if the Word of faith is the announcement of a gift sacramentally mediated. Christian faith is something received and held in the setting of the life of grace, given in the Church in a sacramental embodiment.

One point more. This life of grace goes on in a community, whose teaching declares the divine truth and whose acts communicate the divine life. This community speaks and acts as a continuously existent society, whose existence does not depend simply on the presence and proclamation of the Word or the continued celebration of the Sacraments. There is a distinctively social dimension to the Church's continuity, a core of human, personal Tradition. This is the Tradition of the Ministry, embodied in the apostolic succession of the episcopate. This again is parallel to, rather than deduced from, Scripture, as the role of "apostolic succession"—whatever its precise meaning at this point in history—in the second-century struggle with heresy suggests.⁶ And again, this is what we should expect, if grace and faith are bestowed *in* the community and *for* its building-up to its eternal stature. The faith is confessed and the Sacraments are received in the context of the historically given Ministry and the Church gathered round it.

All that has been said so far has to do primarily with "apostolic Tradi-

3. For a classical statement of the function of the "rule of faith," cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, I, 9:4 (*PG*, 7, 545): "He also who retains unchangeable in himself the rule of truth which he received by means of Baptism, will doubtless recognize the names, the expressions and the parables taken from the Scriptures, but will by no means acknowledge the blasphemous use which these men make of them." See also I, 10:1 (*PG*, 7, 549; 551) on the faith as received from the Apostles, and III, 3-4 (col. 848-57) on the continuity of faith in the succession of authorized teachers.

4. This relation is illustrated in Hippolytus, *Apost. Trad.*, xxi. 12-18 (ed. Dix, pp. 36f.). Cf. J. H. Crehan, S.J., *Early Christian Baptism and the Creed*, pp. 131-44, 159-70.

5. Cf. G. Dix, O.S.B., *The Shape of the Liturgy*, pp. 2ff.

6. Cf. C. H. Turner, in H. B. Swete (ed.), *Essays on the Early History of the Church and the Ministry*, pp. 95-132; E. R. Fairweather and R. F. Hettlinger, *Episcopacy and Reunion*, pp. 17ff.

tion"—with the given forms on which the Church's life depends in this and every age. At this level, the problem of "Scripture and Tradition" is not that of the discrimination of the primary from the secondary, the older from the newer. Rather, it is that of understanding the total givenness of Christianity, and of determining the place of Scripture within this totality.

We call this primary Tradition "apostolic" because of the unique status of the "apostles"—however we define that sometimes elusive group—as authoritative witnesses to and interpreters of the mighty acts of God in Christ. No later teachers, however learned and wise and spiritually gifted, can replace the witness of those from whom the Church "received the beginning of her religion."⁷ It was the awareness of this that led the Church to speak (not altogether wrongly) of the "Apostles' Creed," and to insist on the apostolicity of the New Testament. The same sense underlay the claims—often extravagant, but with a core of truth—for "apostolic constitutions" and suchlike, as well as the emphasis of Catholic Christianity on apostolic succession. In doctrine, worship and order alike, apostolicity is the norm of the Church's behaviour, and the essence of such apostolicity is to be found in what the Church, as it formulated its defence against the first great challenge of heresy, put forward as "apostolic Tradition."

III. THE TRADITION OF THE CHURCH

"I delivered to you . . . what I also received" (I Cor. 15:3). As St. Paul implies, the apostolic Tradition is not just something bestowed on the Church once and stored away; on the contrary, the very term "tradition" stands at once for something transmitted and for the process of transmission, and we look back at the definitive revelation across long centuries, in which the Bible has been read and interpreted, the Creed recited and expanded, the Sacraments administered and enshrined in time-honoured forms of worship, the Ministry perpetuated and diversified. All this elaboration inevitably raises the question of the relation of the developing Church to the foundations of its life—in other words, the question of apostolic Tradition in the living Church.

Two emphases, which it is desirable to keep in balance, have marked Christian attitudes to historical development. On the one hand, we find a reserved approach to growth and expansion, an attitude which can be corrupted into sheer conservatism but which nonetheless expresses the unique importance of the "primitive" in an historical religion. On the other hand, we find an enthusiastic appreciation of the cumulative character of Christian wisdom and of the claims of the developed understanding of the living Church, a viewpoint which sometimes involves an impatience with the restraints of an historical religion but which also expresses a strong sense of the importance of growth into fullness in an eschatological religion. Since the exclusive dominance of either attitude would destroy the balance of

7. *Roman Missal* and *Breviary*, Collect for SS. Peter and Paul.

Christian thought, it is fortunate that the Christian mind has usually managed to make room for both of them, though in varying proportions.

The first emphasis appears in the characteristic Anglican appeal to the Fathers. This appeal to the formulation of Tradition, doctrinal, sacramental, hierarchical, by the pastors and teachers of the formative period of Christian dogma depends on the unique place of the Fathers in Christian history, a place determined by their exact situation in the temporal development of the Church.⁸ The Fathers almost stand between the Tradition of the Apostles and the Tradition of the Church, insofar as they at once bear witness to received Tradition and lay the foundations for its expanded expression and authoritative formulation. Their work, moreover, is a genuinely corporate achievement of the Church. If the Tridentine expression, "the unanimous consent of the Fathers,"⁹ suggests an unfounded optimism regarding points of detail—including, ironically enough, the exegesis of the *Tu es Petrus*—it does point to the peculiar success of the Fathers in helping the Church to reach a common mind in the statement of the fundamentals of her faith. Later theology must, I believe, begin where they left off, and not try to do their work over again under quite different historical conditions.

At the same time—and perhaps the failure to grasp this point has been the conspicuous defect of the Anglican virtue of loyalty to the Fathers—theology must go on to appropriate the characteristic insights of each new age. The cumulative achievement of this enterprise is the mark of continuous growth in the Church's understanding of her faith, and may be considered from two points of view. On the one hand, what we might call the "Tradition of the Doctors" offers us a body of results, some of which have come close to formal "canonization" in the teaching of the Church, and all of which have a claim on our consideration as the product of prolonged reflection on the developing Tradition. Because the "Doctors" of each generation are situated essentially as we are in relation to more fundamental Tradition, it is always possible to go behind their opinions to a weightier standard; nonetheless, their collective judgment can never be treated lightly. On the other hand, the notion of the Tradition of the Doctors stands for the recognition that the mind as well as the body of the Church must grow as long as her temporal mission lasts. The fact that we can share, according to our ability, in the formation of this element of secondary Tradition is an antidote to a false antiquarianism and a challenge to each generation to make its contribution to the fuller comprehension of the truth of the Gospel.

As we have seen, the significance of Fathers and Doctors lies in their place in the continuous life of the Church and in their authenticity as reflections of the whole Church's consciousness of its life in Christ. From

8. On "Fathers" and cognate expressions, cf. R. D. Crouse, in E. R. Fairweather (ed.), *A Scholastic Miscellany* (Philadelphia and London, 1956), p. 159, n. 34.

9. *Professio fidei tridentina* ("Creed of Pius IV"; Denzinger, No. 995).

considering their vocation, therefore, we are driven on to face the problem of the authority of the Tradition-transmitting Church. Just what is implied in the truth that the Church, as the Body of Christ, lives by his life and his Spirit and grows into his grace and truth under that Spirit's guidance?

It is here, perhaps, that the Anglican finds it hardest to chart his course between the Genevan Scylla and the Roman Charbydis. It is tempting to agree with Dr. Cullmann that the apostolic Tradition, embodied in the apostolic Scriptures, is the final test of all subsequent developments, especially since this is partially true, as well as being effective against certain pretensions to authority.¹⁰ It is tempting to agree with Mgr. Journet that the apostolic authority of the living Church, embodied in the Catholic episcopate, is the adequate criterion of the authenticity of Christian teaching, especially since as a church we have devoted much time to the vindication of the apostolic character of episcopacy.¹¹ Yet neither position is ultimately satisfactory. The papal position, for all its stress on continuity, involves the risk of a subjugation of Apostles and Fathers alike to the Tradition of the Doctors. The Protestant position, taken at its face value, looks like a desperate abdication, born of reaction, of the Church's teaching function, while in actual practice it often discloses a certain affinity with the papal idea, the "Tradition of the Protestant Doctors" being substituted for the more effective claim of Pius IX: "La tradizione son' io."¹²

No one can lightly dismiss either the Protestant fear that the Word of God will be made of none effect by human traditions or the Roman Catholic concern for the knowability of the Christian faith even apart from lifelong devotion to Near Eastern studies. Our problem is to reconcile two claims: the reformability of human traditions by reference to the apostolic Tradition, and the right of the living Church to speak Christ's truth in Christ's name and to defend that truth against ignorance and error. If we face both honestly, it seems unlikely that their reconciliation can be achieved either by a simple-minded appeal to Scripture or by the recognition of an organ of infallible teaching in the contemporary Church.

What then? There is no room here for more than a tentative suggestion. The Protestant has to his credit the recognition that primary Tradition really *is* primary, and that everything else, from the Fathers down, is a series of footnotes to a book which we did not write. The Roman Catholic, on the other hand, while the triumph of Ultramontanism and the defensive attitude typical of the post-Tridentine Church have led to the exaggeration and distortion of his own principles, has stoutly defended the truth that we can make very little out of the book without the footnotes and that, moreover, the book did not publish itself. To state my suggestion very naïvely, we must try to relate these inseparable truths in such a way as to do justice at once to the "appeal to history" and to the "living voice."

10. Cf. O. Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple-Apostle-Martyr*, pp. 215-23; *The Early Church*, pp. 87-98.

11. Cf. C. Journet, *The Primacy of Peter*, *passim*.

12. On this saying, cf. T. G. Jalland, *The Church and the Papacy*, p. 522.

But how? First, by recognizing clearly and constantly that the task of theology is the exposition of the primary Tradition of the Gospel of God, so that in all our thinking we endeavour to understand and interpret the mighty acts and the living words of grace. The mind of the Church needs continual refreshment from the wells of apostolic Christianity. But secondly, we must remember that our Christian thinking is not something that we do all by ourselves, each in his little corner. If we are to try to understand our faith, we must look for understanding where we look for faith itself, namely, in the Church, into whose life we were initiated by the *sacramentum fidei*. Nor must we assume as a basic postulate, as some do, that the Church, in whose living continuity we hear the Word and receive the Sacraments, is incapable of formulating definitive interpretations of that Word and those Sacraments. Even less should we suppose, as some have been known to do, that apostolic Tradition and Ecclesiastical Tradition must necessarily conflict, or forget that, in some sense, the latter inevitably mediates the former to us.

Of course, all this is still less than a positive answer to the inescapable question: How is the day-to-day teaching of the Church formed into ecclesiastical Tradition and thus made a definitive acquisition of the Christian mind? If we reject, as I think we must, the simple doctrine of papal infallibility and the rather less simple doctrine of conciliar infallibility, there is no easy answer, and even to begin to formulate a difficult one would be the work of another article. But I believe that we can say this much, as a kind of pointer. If Christians were prepared to enter into and live by the fullness of the Church's apostolic Tradition, and in that setting to think together, not as irresponsible theological debaters, but as participants in a common truth and common Sacraments under common pastors, the consent of the faithful (*consensus fidelium*) would surprise us by its clarity—where clarity was necessary. Despite certain notorious failures of brotherhood, this approach seems to have worked rather effectively in the age of the Ecumenical Councils, and it is more than Anglican nostalgia for the "undivided Church" that prompts the suggestion that its essential principle has something to contribute to the solution of the problems of our own time.