

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 17

Volume 17 • Number 4 • October 1993

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

I have heard it remarked of R. A. Finlayson that whenever he came to speak of ‘grace’ there was a new light in his eyes and a fresh fire in his voice. Was not the title of Adam [p. 420](#) Burnet’s book on preaching *Pleading with Men*? ‘Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved’ ([Rom. 10:1](#)). ‘We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God’ ([2 Cor. 6:1](#)). That is an accent that we need to recover. New Testament preaching means recovering the passion and concern that the apostles had to influence and change their audiences. Let us not think of our subject as purely intellectual. It affects our hearts as preachers as well as our minds.

CONCLUSION

Here, then, are five elements that go into preaching from the New Testament and each one of them is essential. Some of them will be hidden from view in the actual delivery. The hard work done on exegesis—the debates between commentators as to the correct meaning of the text—will not be mentioned, but the preacher should have done his homework faithfully. Equally it is essential that the work of interpretation shall have been carried out with care. How much harm has been done to the church by inappropriate literalism. The presentation and the application are vital in the actual preaching, but we should remember the Latin motto *Ars est celare artem*: the secret of art lies in concealing the art. Or to put it more theologically, the preacher must hide himself but make Jesus as visible as possible. That requires both hard work and the development of a personal relationship with God that is nourished by prayer. My hope is that this occasion may help us all to be more effective in this, the highest—but surely also the humblest—of callings.

Dr. Howard Marshall is Professor of New Testament Exegesis at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. [p. 421](#)

Exegesis and the Role of Tradition in Evangelical Hermeneutics

Gordon D. Fee

Reprinted with permission from Crux March 1991 Vol. 27 No. 1.

This article is the fourth in a series of lectures originally delivered at the Mennonite Brethren Seminary, Fresno, California and since revised and republished. The author reflects on the impact of tradition from the Early Church to churches today on the hermeneutical approach and understanding of the biblical text. He discusses with pointed examples the need to understand one’s own ecclesiastical and theological traditions and the influence of sociological and cultural factors and national history on the process. He openly acknowledges the influence that his own pentecostal tradition has had on his understanding of Scripture. He concludes that not all traditions are adverse to good interpretation but all need to listen with greater sensitivity to others and to be willing to change. He offers some

preliminary suggestions on the way forward in critically affirming tradition while being faithful to biblically given hermeneutical principles.

Editor

In this series of essays I have been probing into ‘Issues in Evangelical Hermeneutics’, in which my basic concern has been over how evangelicals handle the New Testament imperatives, with a special eye toward the thorny issue of women in ministry. Although not always articulated as such, in the course of things, I have noted—and passed over—the role of tradition in the whole hermeneutical enterprise.¹ That matter I now wish to pursue in this final essay. My concern has to do with how our various presuppositions, especially ecclesiastical and theological presuppositions, affect the exegetical and hermeneutical p. 422 enterprise, both positively and negatively. Since all hermeneutics is done within a circle, or circles, of tradition, the burden of this essay as an ‘issue in evangelical hermeneutics’ is for evangelicals to learn a more discriminating recognition and articulation of the role of tradition in our hermeneutics.²

PART I TRADITION THROUGH CHURCH HISTORY

I begin with some definitions, since for the New Testament scholar ‘tradition’ can mean any number of things, and in this essay certainly will. ‘Tradition’ tends to have five distinct nuances, which can be illustrated in the following nearly impossible sentence: The New Testament documents record the tradition (1) of Christ and the apostles, which early church tradition (2) understood to be inspired and authoritative Scripture; the later church codified tradition (3) so that it became equally authoritative with Scripture, an understanding which those within the evangelical tradition (4) reject, but who nonetheless frequently interpret Scripture through the lenses of their own personal and theological traditions (5). Thus:

1. Tradition to the New Testament scholar ordinarily refers to the oral and early written stage of the New Testament materials. It includes Christ’s proclamation of the Kingdom of God, the apostolic proclamation of the gospel, and the teaching that surrounded and followed its proclamation that was ‘handed down’ by the apostles to their converts. In this sense the New Testament itself is a written representation of that tradition, which the church came to understand as the inspired and authoritative expression of what is essential for Christian faith. Although this is the most common use of the term for the New Testament scholar, it is the one that is not addressed in this essay.

2. For the later church, tradition described the reflective understanding of things Christian, expressed in the consensus of the teachers of the church. What most evangelicals tend conveniently to ignore is that it was tradition in this sense that was responsible, under the guidance of the Spirit, for the canonization of the tradition in its first sense. It should also be noted that in the early going this ‘body of understanding’, although authoritative, was not official and was itself p. 423 in process of formulation. Such matters as canon, Trinity, church order, and infant baptism belong to tradition in

¹ This is the fourth in a series of lectures, delivered in their present form at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno CA, November 2–3, 1989. The present lecture was considerably modified and expanded for the same series at the Canadian Theological Seminary, Regina, October 25–26, 1990. I am grateful to several members of the biblical and theological faculties of Canadian Theological Seminary and Canadian Bible College for taking time a week later to interact with it, and to Peter Davids for sending me a synopsis of that interaction, which allowed me further to clarify my thinking at several points.

² For a penetrating essay on some aspects of this question, see J. Ramsey Michaels, ‘Scripture, Tradition, and Biblical Scholarship,’ *The Reformed Journal* 20 (May–June, 1970) 14–17.

this sense, where the seeds of understanding lie within the New Testament, but their explication belongs to a later time. Obviously, on some of these matters we are more agreed than on others, which is one of the difficulties for us—namely, the interplay between the New Testament documents themselves and their explication in the early church.

3. In time tradition in the second sense developed into its third sense, found especially within the Roman Catholic communion, where church tradition holds an official and authoritative role in the church's life, equal to Scripture itself. This, of course, is a primary area of self-conscious difference between evangelicals and Roman Catholics, and probably why evangelicals historically have been uneasy about tradition in the second sense.

4. This in turn leads to the fourth sense of the term. Since the Great Schism of 1054, and especially since the Reformation, the bifurcation of the church into its many streams caused each of these streams—and rivulets, if you will—to develop its own tradition. Hence there is the evangelical tradition, the Pentecostal tradition, the Baptist tradition, etc. Although usually unofficial, tradition in this sense is quite often as powerful a force among evangelicals as it is among Roman Catholics.

5. Finally, there is a non-technical nuance to tradition, which refers to that entire set of experiences and settings making up one's personal history, that one brings to the biblical text before ever a page is opened. For believers that includes one's own personal experiences, sociology, culture, family and religious/ecclesiastical histories, and national history. The problems emerge when these traditions are not recognized as such and therefore often intrude upon or impede the exegetical and hermeneutical enterprise.

My concern in this paper is to reflect on the way that tradition in senses 2, 4 and 5 impacts evangelical hermeneutics. My primary concern is with senses 4 and 5, although a few initial probings with regard to the second sense are also offered. In none of these three senses, of course, are we talking about bad things, but about necessary and inevitable things. On the one hand, one simply cannot, or at least should not, interpret biblical texts as if there were no tradition in the second sense. In both the Pentecostal and evangelical traditions to which I belong, there is no recognition of an official tradition as speaking for the whole church in the third sense, but neither are we willing to jettison the whole Christian tradition in the second sense. Hermeneutics, we would argue, must be a community affair; and the first community to which we are debtors is that of the church in history. [p. 424](#)

On the other hand, neither can one escape the impact of tradition in the fourth and fifth senses. Indeed, much of our difficulty lies here. First, there is that kind of unofficial—often unwritten and therefore sometimes more powerful—ecclesiastical or theological tradition to which we belong, to which we have varying degrees of commitment, and which we often feel compelled to defend or to speak prophetically within. Wittingly or unwittingly, this tradition shapes both our approach to and our understanding of the biblical texts.³ But this is but one part of a larger whole. Second, there is the additional factor of living within a certain cultural, historical, and sociological milieu that impacts so much of how we think or perceive things. This too impacts our understanding.

The difficulties here are twofold: On the one hand, tradition in the fifth sense is so much a part of one's own presuppositional history that very often we rather automatically assume our traditions are shared experiential history of everyone else. On the other hand, there are times when one is more consciously aware of one's tradition, and then tries to

³ In fact it was pointed out by one of the faculty at Canadian Theological Seminary that my own predominant wrestling with the Pauline imperatives in these lectures probably reflects something of my own set of traditions as New Testament scholar and churchman.

make the biblical evidence read in support of that tradition.⁴ In this latter case one moves toward a kind of hearing and reading of texts that would seem to get in the way of the text, not letting the text have its own impact on one's theology and experience.

My interests in the rest of the essay are three. My primary concern is to illustrate the several ways—innocently, subtly, or more consciously—the fourth and fifth senses do in fact affect our hermeneutics, sometimes quite adversely. Secondly, and briefly, I want to urge that the effect of tradition on hermeneutics in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. Finally, I would like to offer some preliminary suggestions for finding a way forward so that tradition may be fully affirmed and appreciated, on the one hand, but not allowed totally to skew our hermeneutics, on the other. [p. 425](#)

PART II ANALOGY OF SCRIPTURE

In a now-famous essay, Rudolf Bultmann once asked whether it was possible to do presuppositionless exegesis, to which question he gave a resounding No.⁵ We bring too much of ourselves—our culture and our traditions—to make such exegesis possible. Although he was contending in particular against a sterile historical positivism, his essay continues to be a byword in biblical studies.

If that is true for the more purely historical task of exegesis, how much more do our presuppositions play a key role in the larger hermeneutical endeavour of theological relevance and application? It is simply not possible for us not to bring our own experience of faith and church to the biblical texts. In fact the very *selectivity* of our hermeneutics, with regard to women's teaching and widow's remarrying, is for the most part related to our traditions, not to our exegesis. Our difficulties here can best be demonstrated by illustration, rather than argumentation.⁶

Let me begin at the more innocent level, where experiential, cultural, or ecclesiastical assumptions are simply read into the text without thought or recognition. It may take such simple forms as when someone from my part of the country reads [Psalm 125:2](#), 'as the mountains are round about Jerusalem', and thinks of real mountains rather than the flat, elevated plain that surrounds the low promontory between two wadis on which ancient Jerusalem sat; or when hearing of 'building one's house on sand' one thinks of long sandy ocean beaches rather than the chalk valleys of the wadis scattered throughout Judea. Or it may take a more churchly form, where one presupposes one's own experience of church (whether building or liturgy), when one reads the texts that speak of the gathered church or of sitting at the Lord's Supper. What, for example, could possibly be further from the New Testament experience of the Lord's Supper than an individual cup and wafer, passed along the pew where people sit facing other people's backs, and tacked onto the end of a preaching service, or of going forward to an altar(!) to be administered wafer and cup by a priest?

But it can take more subtle forms as well. Take, for example, the [p. 426](#) Pentecostal doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, as subsequent to and distinct from conversion

⁴ This is one area, it should be noted, where the biblical scholar within any given tradition (in the fourth sense) often lives in conflict within that tradition, because he or she is so often prone to re-examine the tradition on the basis of the biblical texts, rather than the other way about.

⁵ 'Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?' in *Existence and Faith, Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1960) 289–96.

⁶ I am fully aware of my own vulnerability in what follows, as I hope eventually to make plain. As any perceptive reader will recognize, the very choice of illustrations, and the selective nature of them, says something about my own 'tradition' in the sense that I have just defined it.

and evidenced by speaking in tongues. In all fairness to Pentecostals, much of this understanding came about through a very common approach to Scripture, where Scripture is understood to be establishing historical precedent, and therefore a necessary experience, for subsequent believers. Moreover, the original outpouring of the Spirit at the turn of this century came as a direct result of some students in Topeka, Kansas, who were diligently seeking scripture for the secret of the empowering of the early church. I have elsewhere addressed the question as to whether precedent may be rightly used to establish normative Christian practice;⁷ but it should be noted that the concept of ‘subsequent to and distinct from’, which forms part of Pentecostal theology at this point, came less from the study of Acts, than from their own personal histories, in which it happened to *them* in this way, and therefore was assumed to be the norm even in the New Testament.

Such subtlety with regard to one’s tradition may take a more sophisticated posture in the form of New Testament scholarship itself. I think, for example, of how two great scholars like Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer so cavalierly treat Paul’s Greek in [1 Corinthians 11:10](#) (‘For the reason a woman ought to have authority on her head’). Convinced that the passage is dealing with the subordination of women—despite the fact that this sentence says something quite the opposite—they comment: ‘That “authority” is put for “sign of authority” is not difficult; but why does St. Paul say “authority” when he means “subjection”?’ Mindboggling, to say the least. Or take their comment at the outset of chapters [12–14](#), ‘The phenomena which are described, or sometimes alluded to, were to a large extent abnormal and transitory.’⁸ Transitory, in terms of subsequent historical development, yes; but abnormal, hardly. Careful exegesis of all the texts demonstrates that in the Pauline churches at least, these were the normal patterns of Christian experience. But how else could two Anglicans at the turn of the twentieth century have understood these [p.427](#) texts? They simply lacked the ecclesiastical or experiential frame of reference for Paul’s own experience of the Spirit and church.

In a similar vein, one is reminded of how the leading lexicographer in the history of New Testament scholarship, Walter Bauer, treated the name of Junia in [Romans 16:7](#). His own experience of church simply disallowed that Paul could include a woman under the title of ‘apostle’, so the entire entry is devoted to trying to justify reading the name as Junias (a man’s name), even though there is not a shred of evidence for such a name in the Roman world.

But equally as often, the impact of tradition in its various forms is far less innocent, and indeed may be judged to be rather conscious, and sometimes pernicious. Take, for example, that unfortunate book sent out free to almost all North American clergy a few years back, Robert Schuller’s, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*.⁹ Here is a case in which culture, in this instance a prior commitment to romantic humanistic psychology, not only determines how one reads text, but does so at the expense of the clear meaning of the texts themselves.

⁷ See esp. Chapter 6 in *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (with Douglas Stuart; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 87–102. Cf. an earlier version of this same concern directed toward Pentecostalism in particular, in which I tried to put this matter on somewhat firmer hermeneutical ground (‘Hermeneutics and Historical Precedent—A Major Problem in Pentecostal Hermeneutics’, in *Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism* [ed. R. P. Spittler; Grand Rapids; Baker, 1976] 118–32).

⁸ *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1911) 232, 257.

⁹ Waco TX: Word Books, 1982.

The heart of Schuller's 'new reformation' is a redefinition of human fallenness in terms of romantic humanism. The basic human problem is not that people are fallen, living in rebellion, pride, and disobedience, but that they lack self-esteem. 'The core of sin,' Schuller says, 'is a negative self-image,' and rebellion is only one of its external manifestations (pp. 66–67). I would dare say that not two people in two billion could read [Genesis 3](#), or [Psalms 32](#) or [51](#), or [Romans 1–3](#) and derive that view of the human condition. The problem here is not simply letting culture get in the way of one or a few texts, but of the *whole* of Scripture. Schuller's view stands in basic contradiction to biblical revelation.

When he comes to his supporting texts for finding self-esteem as the way forward, the restructuring of meaning away from the author's intent is even worse. Schuller begins, one should note, by asserting that 'sacred Scriptures are our infallible rule for faith and practice' (p. 45); he then goes on to assert, rightly I would argue, the priority of the Lordship of Christ. But in Schuller's hands this becomes a ploy to bypass exegesis altogether in order to use the Lord's Prayer as Christ's own commission to encourage people to be done with the 'six basic, negative emotions that infect and affect our self-worth' (p. 48). What follows is an interpretation of the Lord's Prayer with an occasional p. 428 moment of validity but which overall is so far removed from Jesus' own intentionality that he would scarcely recognize it. Gone is its eschatological framework of the already/not yet of God's Rule, gone its theocentric opening petitions, gone its humbling of the one praying before the mercy and grace of a loving Father. In its place stands a God who is all soft mush and prayer that calls people to self-dignity, to a noble self-love, to become 'sincere, self-affirmed, divine-adventurers, striving to succeed' (p. 50).

What is simultaneously so subtle and devastating about this is that it is cloaked with evangelical buzz-words, and assumes an evangelical posture toward Scripture. But here indeed is hermeneutics gone astray, where tradition in the form of one's culture has the final word, and God's strong and powerful word is blunted at best, and misdirected altogether at worst.

But if this example is somewhat less helpful, because for most of us the flaw is so easy to spot, it may serve its purpose as a more extreme example so as to help us to see where other forms of tradition, especially ecclesiastical and theological tradition, may have equal capacity to blunt the meaning and intent of God's Word.

I think, for example, of how so many in the Reformed or Dispensational traditions argue vigorously about [1 Corinthians 14:34–35](#) (that women are to keep silent in the churches), suspect as that text is as to its authenticity,¹⁰ that this is an eternal word for the Church in all places at all times; yet they reject everything else in chapter [14](#) as permissible for today, despite the clear imperative to the contrary in v. [39](#)! Only prior commitments to one's tradition could possibly allow for such hermeneutical inconsistency. The greater problem, of course, is that they are quite convinced that there is no inconsistency at all. No wonder those hope standing on the outside of a given tradition looking in wonder whether there is any hope for an evangelical hermeneutics at all.

Similarly, I recall a debate that I was involved in with three other scholars at Gordon-Conwell several years ago, over the issue of women in ministry, including church structures. I had come from a tradition in which that had been my experience from my youth up. Precisely because of this, I indicated that it never occurred to us in our p. 429 tradition to read [1 Timothy 2:11–12](#) or [1 Corinthians 14:34–35](#) except as *ad hoc* words to the local situations. God the Holy Spirit had preceded our looking at the texts by gifting

¹⁰ On this issue see my commentary on 1 Corinthians (NIC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 699–708.

women equally with men, so we asked, as Peter at Cornelius' household, 'Who are we that we can withstand God?'

It turned out that that admission on my part damned everything else I had to say. My views of 1 Timothy were obviously based on experience, not on exegesis. But what amazed me is that the scholar who made this charge assumed his own Presbyterian church order not only to be *biblical*, but the *only* biblical model; and he simply could not be convinced that it was his own experience of a Church in which women did *not* speak, which had equally conditioned everything he had to say when he addressed the Timothy text. Indeed, at one point in a question-and-answer time, when quizzed about this matter, he blurted out, 'Well, there must be *some* kind of juridical authority in the text!' To myself I thought, only a Presbyterian could have read the text in such a way (!); and he could not bring himself to see how much his tradition was affecting everything he said about it.

I have had similar interest in reading the reviews of my recent commentary on 1 Corinthians, which for the most part turned out to be rather positive. But in those parts of reviews where even favourable reviews must offer words of caution to their readers, the two places where I have been challenged most frequently are on some observations I make about church order in 1 Corinthians, or lack thereof, and about the charismatic phenomena. It will surprise no one that the reviewers who have taken exception to the matters on church order are Anglicans and Lutherans, while Dispensationalists to a reviewer bemoaned my handling of chapters [12-14](#). 'But alas,' one of them wrote, 'Dr. Fee is also a Pentecostal.' And then he went on to point out all the things wrong with my point of view, none of which, interestingly enough, were exegetical points, and all of which were based on his prior, unquestioning commitment to his own hermeneutical tradition.

There is one further way in which a prior commitment to tradition affects our hermeneutics. It is perhaps the most subtle of all, and therefore the most difficult for all of us to overcome. It has to do with how tradition (usually in the form of prior theological system) leads us to ask questions of the text in the first place, which then tends to lead us to the kinds of hermeneutical posture we are predisposed toward.

Here let me illustrate from a book basically known only within a given tradition, which is by and large intended to reassure those within that tradition that those outside have an inadequate hermeneutics. The [p. 430](#) book in mind is by Professor Richard Gaffin of Westminster Seminary, entitled *Perspectives on Pentecost*.¹¹ The basic problem I have with Gaffin's book, and the reason for its inclusion here, is his subtle use of the analogy of Scripture, which is both predisposed toward a given theological system and intermixed with skilful theological logic and exegesis of texts so as to arrive at a predetermined conclusion. In the process, in texts he otherwise exegetes rather carefully, Gaffin tends over and over again to disregard Paul's own *ad hoc* intentionality in favour of making them speak to questions that are not only not inherent in the texts and contexts themselves, but in fact are finally quite in opposition to the texts and their contexts.

Gaffin has approached his concern by addressing a series of narrowing concentric circles, always moving toward the singular question of the cessation of the gifts of prophecy and tongues. When he gets near to the inner circle of questions, the argument has the following steps:

(1) Prophecy and tongues function similarly, both being what he terms 'revelatory gifts'.

(2) On the basis of [Ephesians 2:20](#) he argues that apostolicity and prophecy are also to be understood as 'foundational gifts.'

¹¹ Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979.

(3) Since apostles ceased after their function of being 'foundational' for the church, so too did the prophets (although this seems to fly full in the face of actual church history).

(4) Since tongues and prophecy function alike (from this view), then tongues, too, should cease with the apostles and prophets.

(5) Finally, he argues that it is gratuitous to assume that [1 Corinthians 13:10](#) intends that tongues should continue until the *Eschaton*, and with further circles of logic tries to discount that assumption.

What makes this argument persuasive to some is its apparent logic, coupled with the author's obvious ability to exegete individual texts. However, quite apart from some highly questionable exegetes of the key texts in 1 Corinthians, for which time does not permit a rebuttal here, what I find particularly unpersuasive is the fact that the logic *precedes* the exegesis. Indeed, the whole enterprise has its logical form structured by asking a question to which not one of the biblical texts intend an answer. Gaffin's overruling question is, 'When will tongues [p. 431](#) cease?' The one text that addresses that question at all—and even there it is quite incidental to Paul's real point—is [1 Corinthians 13:10](#), which almost certainly intends, 'at the *Eschaton*,' as its answer. But since that answer is the one Gaffin is uncomfortable with, he sets up his logical circles to answer his own question with, 'at the end of the first century.' But in no case does he, nor can he, show that the answer to *that* question is a part of the biblical author's intent in the texts that are examined. He circumvents that by suggesting that it was the *Divine* author's intent, on the basis of his own form of 'analogy of Scripture'.

I would contend that this is not a legitimate use of the analogy of Scripture—because the question is a wrong one. Indeed, what should be noted here is that traditional Pentecostalism has had its own way of posing questions and arriving at answers, albeit with much less exegetical sophistication. Their question is: 'Should all speak with tongues when baptized with the Spirit?' Their answer of course is 'Yes'. But that is determined *not* on the meaning and intent of the biblical texts themselves, but by the very framing of the question in that way.

Let me finally conclude this critique of others with the candid admission that I do not with all of these illustrations suggest that *I* come to the text with a clean slate. I give them in part to illustrate what a tenuous task this is; in fact, knowing a bit about the basic sociology of the first century believers, and about their world view, I often wonder whether it is possible for the average North American white Protestant to understand the Bible at all, since such people assume their own middle class sociology to be that of the New Testament, whereas almost exactly the opposite is the case. But I am also illustrating in part how much easier it is to see this problem in others than in oneself. And that is precisely the great hermeneutical danger—that the biases of others are so clear!

PART III HERMENEUTICAL CORRECTIVES

Having set the reader up with all of this, let me now seem to reverse myself and say that coming to the text with our tradition(s) in hand is not in itself a bad thing. Indeed, it is impossible to do otherwise. But what I want to stress here is that in itself this is neither good nor bad, and that in fact, it may often serve to the good. Some years ago, when Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* first appeared on Broadway, it had only limited success and soon ended. But some months later it played at San Quentin, where it was an immediate and thoroughgoing hit; the inmates applauded and applauded—not because they were [p. 432](#) being given a bit of culture, but because they identified so thoroughly with Estrogen and Vladimir, who simply waited for Godot, who never came.

That experience brought it back to Broadway, where it had a long run and huge success. The ‘tradition’ of the inmates at San Quentin gave them an understanding that allowed others to see it through different eyes—much closer to Beckett’s, I would guess.

Thus it often happens that our own tradition(s) cause(s) us to read a text in a certain way, and assume it to be the only way, or the right way. And then someone with a different tradition reads and interprets the text, and suddenly something like scales fall from our eyes. Take, for example, what I consider to be one of the significant contributions of the peace churches to the rest of us—to help us read the texts from the perspective of the early church on matters of peace and war, and not to assume that ‘my country right or wrong’ was in fact something said by Paul or John—or could possibly be a Christian understanding of nation.

I think in this regard of my own experience of celebrating the baptism of thirty-seven new converts—all men—in rural Senegal some years ago. It was the rainy season, so there was a large watering hole just away from the huts of the village, where the baptism was to take place. After a ‘brief’ service (one hour at 135 degrees Fahrenheit) in their newly constructed ‘church building’, we paraded through the village to the watering hole for the baptisms. Of course, for such a new event the entire village turned out. What struck me was the outburst of laughter when the first of the new believers, after his confession of faith in the Lord Jesus, was immersed. They had never seen such a thing—and a religious ceremony at all! But as I watched the others, one by one, declare his own faith in Christ before the laughing—and sometimes mocking—crowd, I suddenly had a strong sense that all other baptisms that I had experienced were much less like the New Testament experience than these. I have never again easily read past the texts that say, ‘and they were all baptized.’ In the New Testament baptism was a public event, not cloistered in a church in the presence of believers only.

There are scores of other illustrations; but I offer these to say that tradition *per se* is not the problem. To the contrary, the ability to hear texts through the ears of other traditions may serve as one of the best exegetical or hermeneutical correctives we can bring to the task.

Let me add also that if the ability to transcend one’s tradition is rare, it can be and has been done—and often enough that we are usually in great debt to those who so do. For example, it was such insights by [p. 433](#) Hermann Gunkel on the Spirit in the New Testament,¹² and by Johannes Weiss on the place of apocalyptic in the New Testament,¹³ which stood over against the entire stream of late nineteenth century New Testament scholarship with its non-personal approach to the Spirit and its ‘soft mush’ Jesus, that first really allowed the first century documents to be true to themselves on these matters. Of course, as one reads Gunkel or Weiss one picks up a strongly iconoclastic bent to them, which thus sets in motion a *new* set of presuppositions. But at least they caused the whole world of Germanic scholarship to stop looking at the texts with the presuppositions of nineteenth century idealism. And there have been other such moments, where whole new possibilities of hearing the ancient texts on their own terms have been made more available to us. So all is not lost.

But even more importantly, let me now return to the role of tradition in the second sense noted earlier. Here I begin with an observation, which is also a plea. By and large, evangelicals need to take more seriously the words of [2 Peter 1:20](#), that ‘no prophecy of

¹² *Die Wirkungen des heiligen Geistes nach der populären Anschauung der apostolischen Zeit und nach der Lehre des Apostels Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1988).

¹³ Johannes Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1892; 2nd ed. 1900); Eng. transl of 1st ed., *Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation' (NRSV). Exegesis and hermeneutics, even when worked on or worked out in the privacy of one's own study, must finally be the product of the Christian community at large. At this point, we all stand indebted to that long history of orthodox consensus. If, for example, on the doctrine of the Trinity Church tradition has been far more positive about what certain texts taught than the exegete might be comfortable with, such tradition was never far afield in terms of what was inherently embedded in the New Testament texts, even if not precisely or intentionally explicated.

In scores of other areas, tradition, the reflective understanding of the biblical texts in the Church throughout its history, has forged out for the Church the theological undergirding for its various structures and practices; and even when it has needed to be corrected, or has been judged and found wanting, this is not the work of one or a few. To put it baldly, where there is no appreciation for tradition, for the rich heritage of reflective theologizing with its general consensus on the basic Christian verities, Protestantism has spawned a mass of individual heresies, all vying for centre stage as the single truth of God.

p. 434

PART IV THE WAY FORWARD

That leads me finally to say a few words as to how we might trace our paths through this most difficult of tasks, and be simultaneously both affirming and critical of our tradition(s) in the exegetical-hermeneutical endeavour. Here I have only some reflections and observations, nothing definitive:

1. With regard to the tradition of the Church (in the second sense), it very well may be that we could learn to recognize levels of tradition, which might be given different weight.¹⁴ For example, some issues have been heavily reflected on as central issues of the faith, and the Church has come to a high level of consensus concerning them, a consensus that has held for centuries and that is common to the Eastern Church, the Western Church and the mainstream of Protestantism. Moreover, such understanding seems to be quite the point, or at least in keeping with the thrust of, the biblical texts themselves (e.g. the Trinity; the Person of Christ).

Other doctrines, on the other hand, have not been the focus of much theological reflection, even though they have assumed positions with a high level of consensus for centuries. Here one might think of the traditional role of male leadership, with the general failure to recognize the giftedness of women, or when recognized to allow such gifts to operate only within the confines of women with other women.

At yet another level is the interpretation of single verses or passages, which have virtually never been the focus of church reflection. For this reason, there has often been a variety of interpretations of certain texts, with no sense of reflective consensus as to their meaning. Here the ongoing work of exegesis is itself a part of the formulation of the tradition.

If evangelicals are to take tradition more seriously as to its role in the hermeneutical process, a weighing of tradition in this manner might be useful. It would take a lot of evidence for one cautiously to disagree with the first level of consensus, whereas one might do so more easily at the next level. In any case, such an understanding of tradition might help us to take it more seriously, without giving it absolute authority.

¹⁴ For the substance of this paragraph I am especially indebted to my interaction with the faculty of Canadian Theological Seminary.

2. With regard to the effect of tradition in the fourth and fifth senses, the first and most difficult task is for any one of us to be able to discover our own traditions, and how in many different ways they affect our [p. 435](#) exegesis and hermeneutics. Here the only secret is no secret at all; it requires the effort of a lifetime—to be vigorously demanding of oneself, so as to spot when it is our biases that are at work, or when we are more truly listening to God’s very word for ourselves and for others. I think, for example, of such a simple thing as the recognition of our own personal histories in a thoroughly individualistic culture, and how differently—and more correctly—we will understand and apply texts when we recognize the essentially corporate—people as a whole people—presupposition that lies behind all the epistolary imperatives. Think, for example, how differently one understands [1 Corinthians 3:16–17](#) or [Philippians 2:12–13](#), when one thinks not in terms of individual obedience to such texts, but of their corporate nature—calling a community to obedience in terms of its new self-understanding in Christ.

Or I think further of the whole, generally rationalistic, and almost totally *literary* (= written) culture in which the North American inerrancy debate has taken place—without once recognizing how differently a basically *oral* culture handles such things as precision in wording or in the transmission of traditions. This is not to discount the concern that brought about that debate, but it is to question whether it would have had much meaning to the earliest Christians, whom we encounter in the pages of the New Testament itself.

3. Thirdly, and of equal—or perhaps greater—significance, is a willingness on the part of all of us to be open to one another—to reexamine how we perceive our traditions as affecting us, especially in light of how others perceive it. This, of course, can be terribly threatening, because most of us take considerable comfort—and rightly so—in the stability and security that tradition affords us. There can be little question that we are emotionally so constructed that we can handle the examination at the perimeter with much greater detachment than an examination of the core.

4. The final suggestion is the most difficult of all to put into practice, and that, of course, is that we actually change—or be willing to change or modify—rather than become more defensive. It may well be, of course, that such examination will lead to a greater confidence in the basic correctness, or value, of one’s own traditions. But may God the Holy Spirit give us integrity and readiness to change or modify, if that seems to be needed.

Let me conclude by emphasizing that these are merely probings, as was true of this whole series of essays. In all of them my concern has been singular. In a context of faithfulness to Scripture as God’s Word, how best do we understand these ancient texts—especially the biblical [p. 436](#) imperatives—as a word for all seasons, as a word that addresses us and calls us to obedience to the living God? I may not have resolved much for many, or any, of my readers; but I do hope that I have at least ‘stirred up our pure minds’ to think more carefully, and hopefully consistently, on these matters.

Dr. Gordon Fee is Professor of New Testament studies at Regent College, Vancouver, Canada. [p. 437](#)

Hermeneutical Principles in the Biblical Foundation for Mission