

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

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).