

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

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

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

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

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

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

VIII

An Evangelical View of Scripture and Tradition

Paul G. Schrottenboer

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONTINUITY IN THE HISTORY OF REDEMPTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONTINUITY OF CREATION AND REDEMPTION

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

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

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

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

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

GOD SHOWS THE WAY

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

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

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

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

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

THE UNCHANGING GOD HAS INITIATED CHANGE

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHANGES IN THE CHURCH IN THE APOSTOLIC AGE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

191

TRADITION AS A TASK

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

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

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

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

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

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

NORM FOR THE CHURCH IN HISTORY

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

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

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

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

CHRISTIAN TRADITION AND THE UNITY OF GOD'S PEOPLE

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

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

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

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

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

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

OUR TASK IN A CHANGING, DIVERSE CHURCH

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

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

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

1. Recognize the tentativeness of our response to the gospel

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

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

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

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

2. Exercise greater criticism of ourselves and of our fathers

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Seek the guidance of the Spirit

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

Epilogue

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Book Reviews

IRENAEUS ON THE SALVATION OF THE UNEVANGELIZED

by Terrance L. Tiessen