

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

IV

Scripture and Tradition in the Roman Catholic Church

George Vandervelde

INTRODUCTION

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

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

THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴ See Ratzinger, pp. 56–57.

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

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

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

THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: DEI VERBUM

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

6

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

⁸ *Ibid.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DETERMINATIVE TRADITION

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

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

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

¹³ *Our Lady*, pp. 71–74.

¹⁴ *Our Lady*, pp. 78–79.

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁵ *Our Lady*, p. 317.

¹⁶ *Our Lady*, p. 319.

¹⁷ *Our Lady*, pp. 318–319.

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

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

TRADITION AND CRITERIA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE 'OVER-AGAINST' OF SCRIPTURE

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

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

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

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

²² *Ibid.*, p. 247.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

V

Scripture and Tradition in Reformation Thought

Gerald Bray

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

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

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

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

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