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## II

# The New Testament as Tradition

Brian Wintle

Tradition especially as it relates to Scripture has been a thorny issue in some segments of the Protestant Church ever since the Reformation. The difference of opinion is in a sense historical. The further away the church moved from the Roman Catholic Church, the lower the place that was apparently given to tradition. Or, to put it differently, the stronger the emphasis on *sola scriptura* the less the value officially given to ecclesiastical tradition.

It is true, nevertheless, that all segments of the church either deliberately or unwittingly do give value to tradition. It has been well stated that even the segments of the church that officially give no credence to tradition are in their very doing so honouring their respective traditions.

The subject of this paper is the New Testament as tradition. However, the primary focus of the paper will be on a prior issue—that is, the place given to tradition in the New Testament writings. In other words, it is necessary to determine how tradition is viewed and understood in the New Testament writings before we can understand in what sense it is valid to refer to these writings themselves as tradition.

We could begin with the general statement that although Jesus appears in the synoptics to have been quite harsh in his criticism of and opposition to Pharisaic tradition in particular, we find that there is an overall positive evaluation of tradition in the apostolic and sub-apostolic church. Now, if this statement can be substantiated, it reflects a situation that needs explaining; after all, the apostolic church was ostensibly built on Jesus Christ as its foundation. So how do we explain this?

## I

### JESUS AND TRADITION

In the synoptic gospels, Jesus appears to be in conflict with the religious leaders—the scribes and the Pharisees—over three aspects of the Jewish law: the sabbath, ritualistic purity, the issue related to the Corban vow and divorce. So we shall begin by considering what was the issue in these controversy narratives. Besides this, we will need to examine the significance of the antitheses in [Mt. 5:21–48](#) when Jesus apparently [P. 116](#) set his teaching in antithesis to rabbinic teaching.

#### The sabbath controversies

There are several pericopae in both the synoptics and the fourth gospel where Jesus was criticized for certain actions of his own—primarily healing the sick—or actions of his disciples on the sabbath—plucking ears of grain as they walked through the fields—that were considered by the religious authorities as being forbidden. There is some uncertainty regarding the precise nature of the objection when Jesus healed on the sabbath (e.g. [Mk. 3:1–6](#)). On some occasions, Jesus apparently defended his action on the basis of tradition itself.<sup>1</sup> For example, both the schools of Hillel and Shammai apparently agreed that rescuing an animal that had fallen into a ditch did not violate the sanctity of the sabbath. In [Mk. 3:4](#), Jesus silences his critics by contending on the basis of this very tradition that healing cannot be considered in any way an inappropriate action for the sabbath.<sup>2</sup> In similar vein, in [Ln. 7:23](#) Jesus defends healing on the sabbath on the basis of the tradition that allowed a child to be circumcised on the sabbath (cf. Bruce, 1970, 25).<sup>3</sup>

In [Mk. 2:23–28](#) we have another incident which gives us an insight into Jesus' attitude to Jewish tradition. Unfortunately, here too there is a lack of consensus among scholars regarding the point that Jesus makes in defending the action of his disciples. According to some scholars, like Bruce (1970, 25f.), Jesus' primary appeal is to the divine intention of the sabbath institution. He cites the incident when David and his men were not censured for eating the 'bread of the Presence' in the sanctuary—which, according to sacred law, was reserved for the priests alone—to establish the principle that the satisfaction of normal human need must take priority over the rulings of various rabbinical schools. R. H. Gundry makes a somewhat different point. 'Jesus did not describe the sabbath as less important than human benefit,' he says, 'but as meant for it—hence, he and his disciples broke the sabbath to fulfil its purpose. The argumentative appeal to the 'unlawful' action of David shows that Jesus recognized his disciples' action as breaking the Sabbath,' (1993, 365).<sup>4</sup> This understanding of the incident, however, is strongly contested by other scholars. 'It must be stressed that in all three accounts there is no intention to [p.117](#) justify the disciples by means of an Old Testament precedent' says R. Banks (1975, 115). What is at issue is Jesus' authority—his authority latent in the permission he grants to his disciples to act on the sabbath or in his corresponding exegesis and teaching to that effect.<sup>5</sup> Banks insists that 'the comparison is not between the conduct of David and his

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. W. D. Davies, 1962, 96: 'In his treatment of the sabbath and divorce, Jesus always criticizes the law from within the law.'

<sup>2</sup> See too Cranfield, 1972, 119f. Some scholars differ in their understanding of the point at issue. For example, R. Banks (1975, 115) contends that the position Jesus adopts is that he will not abide by any tradition that hinders him from fulfilling his mission, an intrinsic part of which is his healing ministry.

<sup>3</sup> See too Moule, 1966, 66.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Cranfield: 'The drift of the argument is that the fact that scripture does not condemn David for his action shows that the rigidity with which the Pharisees interpreted the ritual law was not in accordance with scripture, and so was not a proper understanding of the Law itself' (1972, 115). See too Pinnock, 1984, 38: 'Healing on the Sabbath and letting his disciples pick a few ears of corn to eat on that holy day did not constitute breaking the Sabbath for Jesus. He was more concerned to be loving than to be seen as strictly adhering to the letter of it (the law).'

<sup>5</sup> Cf. P. M. Casey, 1988, 7: 'Jesus did not share the concern of the Pharisees and others to defend Judaism by means of the expansion of regulations. Thus he observed the sabbath but he vigorously defended his right to heal on that day, and he was not shocked that people who were hungry or in need should pluck corn in order to have enough to eat on that day; rather with prophetic authority he defended their right to satisfy their most basic needs on the day which God created for them to rest and to enjoy.' However, W. D. Davies, 1962, 96 interpreting the title 'Son of man' in [Mk. 2:28](#) as a corporate entity—that is, the messianic community—understands this incident differently. 'Even when he (Jesus) or his disciples do break the law,

followers on the one hand, and Jesus and his disciples on the other, but between Jesus and David themselves' (1975, 115). Interestingly, this understanding of the incident is supported further by the Matthaean account, according to which Jesus makes a further point: if it was traditionally accepted that the work of the priests in the Temple could not be brought under the ban on work on the sabbath, much more did his actions as 'one who is greater than the temple' surpass traditional rulings on the sabbath.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, there is no scholarly consensus that in the above incidents Jesus is actually rejecting Pharisaic tradition.

### Ritual purity

What about, then, the incident recorded in [Mk. 7:1-23](#)? This is actually the only passage in the gospels in which there are explicit references to tradition as such. On this occasion the Pharisees and scribes criticized Jesus because his disciples did not ceremonially wash their hands before eating. 'Why don't your disciples live according to the "tradition of the elders"?' they asked in indignation. In response, Jesus denounced them as hypocrites who 'had let go of the commands of God and (were) holding on to the traditions of men' (v. [8](#)). James Dunn pinpoints the issue: '“The tradition of the elders” encouraged the worshipper to remain at the level of the merely outward, the superficial, and so encouraged hypocrisy' (1977, 63). This, then, appears to be a much clearer example of Jesus' rejection of Pharisaic tradition.

Jesus went on further to speak sarcastically of the fine way the Pharisees had 'of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe (their) own traditions' (v. [9](#)). The particular interpretation that he criticizes here was one which enabled a person to avoid the duty of maintaining his parents if he could claim that the money which he [p. 118](#) might have used for that purpose was already 'devoted to God' (*qorban*).<sup>7</sup> 'Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down', says Jesus (v. [13](#)). Clearly, this 'tradition of the elders' which had been handed down and was valued so highly by the religious authorities is rejected here by Jesus as the work of men on the grounds that such tradition, instead of explaining scripture, actually set it aside.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that neither of the points that Jesus makes on this occasion necessarily implies that he rejected tradition *per se*. What he rejected was tradition which started as a way of interpreting the law but which had become 'in practice more important than the law'.<sup>9</sup>

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this is justified (as) ... in the interests of the emerging messianic community or Jesus reacts to certain situations in immediate response to the will of God, thereby recognizing the supreme claims of that will without considering the effect of his action on the law.' See too J. D. G. Dunn, 1984, 407: '... the principle encapsulated here was ... about the liberty of the new age of God's favour: in the new age brought in by Jesus, faith and piety are not bound to or dependent on such rulings (as that of the Pharisees)'.

<sup>6</sup> See R. H. Gundry, 1982, 224f.; Bruce, 1970, 25.

<sup>7</sup> See Bruce, 1970, 24 for some interesting details regarding this tradition.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Cranfield, 'It is true that the scribes could point to an absolute command concerning vows inside scripture itself but it was their interpretation, their tradition, which was at fault; for it clung to the letter of the particular passage in such a way as to miss the meaning of scripture as a whole' (1972, 258). See too Cullmann, 1956, 63; Dunn, 1977, 63; R. H. Gundry, 1982, 224f.; Bruce, 1970, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Dunn, 1977, 63. Cf. W. Lane, 1974, 252: 'Jesus categorically rejects the practice of using one biblical commandment to negate another. The Law ... is an expression of God's covenant faithfulness as well as of his righteousness and in no circumstances was obedience to one commandment intended to nullify another. The fault lay not in the commandment but in an interpretative tradition which failed to see Scripture in its wholeness.' Cf. also I. W. Batdorf, 1962, 685.

## The law of divorce

When we turn to the law of divorce, the situation is comparable to the above. It was assumed in rabbinic interpretation, on the basis of [Deut. 24:1](#), that a man was entitled to divorce his wife if he found ‘something indecent about her’. The only point of discussion was what precisely constituted ‘something indecent’. But when Jesus was asked for his opinion on this ([Mk. 10:1–12](#)), he went back beyond the Deuteronomic legislation to the original ordinance in which man and woman were made for each other, being joined together by God. Therefore, he contended, divorce was not originally envisaged, but was actually a later provision made because of the hardness of men’s hearts.<sup>10</sup> ‘An ethic which is truly to reflect God’s will must be built ... on basic principles’.<sup>11</sup> And such a concession to human sinfulness [p. 119](#) could hardly be treated as a divine principle.<sup>12</sup>

So in the case of the law of divorce, too, we find that Jesus rejected tradition only to the extent to which the divine was not properly understood. It was imperative that it be understood that divorce, even on the grounds of marital unfaithfulness, was a departure from God’s intention, and at best had to be accepted as ‘the lesser evil’. Jesus rejected what Jewish legalism had done—emphasized the concession rather than the divine intention.<sup>13</sup>

## The antitheses of Mt. 5:21–48

We turn finally in this section to the so-called ‘antitheses’ passage in [Matthew 5:21–48](#) where Jesus apparently sets his teaching very deliberately in antithesis to what the Law had been understood to mean. The antitheses are not strictly uniform: in some cases Jesus’ teaching is contrasted with a traditional summary of or even inference from the Old Testament law, in others with a literal Old Testament quotation. However, we can give general agreement to Gundry’s assessment of these antitheses: ‘In all of them Matthew has shown that Jesus carried out the tendencies of the OT law to their true ends: OT prohibitions of murder and adultery escalate to prohibitions of anger and lust; OT limitations on divorce and oaths escalate to demands for marital compassion and simple

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<sup>10</sup> According to W. Lane, 1974, 355, the point being made is that ‘in [Deut. 24:1](#) divorce is tolerated, but not authorized or sanctioned’. Gundry, 1993, 538 disputes this on the grounds that in Mark, although the Pharisees speak about Moses ‘permitting’ divorce, Jesus speaks of ‘this commandment’ (RSV). Interestingly, in the Matthaean account ([19:1–12](#)) the situation is the other way round. It is Jesus who speaks about Moses ‘permitting’ divorce, whereas the Pharisees use the term ‘command’. It is probably unwise, then, to attempt establishing a case either way on the basis of the terminology used. But it remains true that the most natural reading of [Deut. 24:1](#) seems to be that divorce is a concession or provision that was made to deal with ground realities.

<sup>11</sup> France, 1985, 281. ‘Jesus’ appeal to first principles has the effect of apparently setting one passage of Scripture against another, but this is not in the sense of repudiating one in favour of the other, but of insisting that each is given its proper function, the one as a statement of the ideal will of God, the other as a (regrettable but necessary) provision for those occasions when human sinfulness has failed to maintain the ideal.’

<sup>12</sup> Cranfield’s comments are helpful: ‘A distinction has to be made between that which sets forth the absolute will of God, and those provisions which take account of men’s actual sinfulness and are designed to limit and control its consequences. (Such) provisions which God’s mercy has designed ... must not be interpreted as divine approval for sinning’ (1972, 319f.). See too Hill, 1981, 280f.

<sup>13</sup> The force of Jesus’ argument is such that most commentators think the exceptive clause in [Matt. 19:9](#) is secondary and reflects a later modification of Jesus’ ruling, in effect reintroducing the Deuteronomic loophole. So, e.g. Bruce, 1970, 27. On the other hand, it may be argued that the ‘exceptive clause’ does no more than make explicit what is assumed in Mark—namely, that marital unfaithfulness—and this alone—automatically annuls a marriage by the creation of a new sexual union. But proper divorce—that is, the breaking of a marriage which is still intact, is absolutely forbidden. See France, 1985, 281f.; Hill, 1981, 281.

truthfulness; and the guard against revenge and commands to love neighbours and hate enemies in the OT escalate to the requirements of meekness and love even for enemies.’<sup>14</sup>

We may summarize our findings thus: there is insufficient evidence in the gospel material to support the view that Jesus rejected Jewish tradition outright. In fact, on more than one occasion he appealed to that very tradition to defend his actions or that of his disciples. It would be much more accurate to say that, in his controversies with the religious authorities, the primary point at issue was whether the traditional understanding or interpretation of the Law facilitated the fulfilment of the divine will or actually hindered such fulfilment.

## II THE TRADITIONS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

There is widespread scholarly agreement that the traditions of the early P. 120 church divide conveniently into three categories: 1) a summary of the Christian preaching—the kerygmatic tradition; 2) various works and words of Jesus—the traditions about Jesus; and 3) ethical and practical instruction—the ethical tradition.<sup>15</sup>

### The kerygmatic tradition

In [1 Corinthians 15](#) Paul, in referring in v. [3](#) to the summary of his evangelistic preaching in Corinth, speaks of having ‘passed on; (*paradidomi*) what he had himself ‘received’ (*paralambano*). Now these verbs were regularly used by the rabbis to refer to their oral tradition and it is almost certain that we are to understand that in the early church, the kerygmatic tradition was transmitted in a manner analogous to that by which rabbinic tradition was. The content of this kerygmatic tradition, referred to in [1 Cor. 15:3ff](#), consisted of a summary interpretation of Jesus’ death and then included a list of resurrection appearances. So an obvious inference is that the tradition was regarded as authoritative because it went back to apostolic eyewitnesses. There is, however, a further point of significance. It is most unlikely that the tradition which Paul had thus received included his own experience of the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. If that is so, however, the clear implication of the inclusion of this event in v. [8](#) in the list of resurrection appearances is that Paul, in passing on the tradition which he had received, modified it by adding his own encounter with the exalted Lord to the list. Here then is an important difference between the rabbinic understanding and the Pauline—and, presumably, the early Christian—approach to tradition: the rabbis regarded it of fundamental importance that the received tradition be passed on unchanged; for the apostle Paul, however, this was not so. The tradition for him was a living tradition—that could be added to as in this case.<sup>16</sup> His authority for doing so was presumably related to his having been called to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul uses the same terminology in referring to the Christian preaching as the subject-matter of tradition elsewhere in his letters. For example, in [2 Thess. 2:15](#), [3:6](#) he exhorts the Thessalonians to ‘stand firm and hold to the traditions (fn.)’ that he had passed on to them and ‘to keep away from every brother who ... does not Five according to the

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<sup>14</sup> 1982, 100. For the significance of the form in which the antitheses are couched see D. Daube, 1956, 55–62.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. R. P. C. Hanson, 1962, 10ff.; Bruce, 1970, 29; Dunn, 1977, 66–69; Cullmann, 1956, 64; G. E. Ladd, 1970, 228.

<sup>16</sup> See K. Wegenast, 1978, 774 for some helpful comments on this; also Gundry, 1987, 161–178.

tradition' they had received from him. Similarly, in [Phil. 4:9](#) he exhorts his readers to put into practice 'whatever you have learned or received or heard from me'. In [1 Cor. 15:2](#) he speaks of the Corinthians 'holding firm to the word I preached to you' and in [Rom. 6:17](#) he refers to his readers having wholeheartedly obeyed 'the form of teaching' to which they had been committed—presumably at their conversion and baptism. Admittedly the reference in some of these texts is primarily to the ethical tradition which we shall consider later. All these references, however, [p. 121](#) strongly suggest that the process of formulating Christian truth began at a very early stage rather than towards the end of the New Testament period as is supposed by various scholars.<sup>17</sup>

In some of his letters Paul refers to a plurality of gospels, some of which he apparently accepts as valid, even though they differed from 'his gospel'. For example, in [Gal. 2:7](#) alongside the gospel that he preached, which he describes as 'the gospel to the Gentiles' he sets Peter's 'gospel to the Jews'. Paul evidently considered this a valid form of the kerygma, meant for the Jews. On the other hand he vehemently objects to the 'different gospel' that was being preached by some of his Jewish Christian opponents—for example in Galatia ([Gal. 1:6–9](#)) and in Corinth ([2 Cor. 11:4](#)). The interesting point to note here is that although Paul rejected these persons and their message, the very language that he uses in refuting them suggests that not everybody in the early church rejected them. For example, he denounces some of these persons as 'false brothers' in [Gal. 2:4](#), and in [2 Cor. 10:13](#) he refers to his opponents in Corinth as 'false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ'. Whatever the relative merits of the claims of Paul's opponents and his counter-claims, one thing is clear: these were professing Christians who had the courage to challenge Paul's apostolic authority precisely because they enjoyed the support of at least some of the leaders in the Jerusalem church. In other words, the evidence suggests that there was a diversity of formulations of the kerygma in the New Testament church.<sup>18</sup>

We have already seen that Paul did not hesitate to add to the kerygmatic tradition that he had received. The implication of there being different formulations of the gospel, some of which Paul accepted and others of which he rejected as 'no gospel' is that the kerygmatic tradition was also interpreted in the process of transmission. In fact, it is precisely the fact that as the church moved into new situations she found it necessary to interpret the gospel in those situations that best explains the multiplicity of formulations of the gospel.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, scholars like Dunn are 'probably overstating the case when they emphasize the 'differences and disagreements' between these formulations and are reluctant to speak of anything other than minimal agreement among them.<sup>20</sup> Other studies since the seminal work by C. H. Dodd (1944<sup>2</sup>) on the apostolic [p. 122](#) preaching

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<sup>17</sup> See e.g. C. Brown, 1978, 61.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Dunn (1977, 11–32 (31)). This diversity is confirmed by other texts as well. In [2 Cor. 11:4](#) Paul speaks of his opponents who 'preach a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached' and in [Phil. 1:15–18](#) of those who 'preach Christ' with ulterior motives. Irrespective of whether Paul accepted these versions of the kerygma as valid or not, the fact remains that there was a multiplicity of formulations.

<sup>19</sup> Another avenue of research that would give us some understanding of how Paul handled what he 'received' is the study of pre-Pauline formulae in the Pauline corpus. A. M. Hunter's work (1961, 24–35, 120–122) was foundational.

<sup>20</sup> For a critique of Dunn's overemphasis on the diversity and his minimizing the unity in the New Testament writings see Carson, 1983, 65–95 (72ff.).

and its developments have shown that it is possible to identify the essentials of a 'common kerygma'.<sup>21</sup> We will consider this further later.

Closely related to this issue, is another that is posed by the language that the apostle uses in [Gal. 1:12](#) in his defence of his apostolic commission and authority to proclaim the gospel. In this passage, the apostle insists, 'I did not receive it (the gospel) from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.' How is this statement to be reconciled with Paul's *paradosis* language in [1 Cor. 15:33ff.](#)? Now in [Gal. 1](#) Paul proceeds to refer to his confrontation with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus when he speaks of God being 'pleased to reveal his Son to me' ([1:16](#)). Therefore F. F. Bruce's resolution of the apparent tension between the 'gospel by revelation' and the 'gospel by tradition' is quite plausible: 'The gospel which Paul received without mediation on the Damascus road consisted in the revelation not of a fact but of a person—Jesus the risen Lord. On the other hand, the historical events of Holy Week and Easter and the following days were communicated to him by those who had experienced them first hand: in this sense he 'received' the gospel from others' (1970, 31).

However, there have been other attempts to resolve this tension too. Of these, perhaps the most noteworthy is that of O. Cullmann who has argued that revelation and the apostolic tradition are actually just two sides of the same coin since what was transmitted as tradition was at the same time continuously validated by the exalted Lord through his Spirit in the apostles.<sup>22</sup> In other words, in Cullmann's opinion, the problem is an unreal one. Cullmann is not very convincing here; however, in his discussion he puts his finger on two important points. Firstly, he draws attention to the fact that in the very passages where Paul makes reference to the gospel as revelation or as tradition—most importantly [Gal. 1:12ff.](#) and [1 Cor. 15:3ff.](#)—he makes reference also to his apostolic commission. The significance of this observation is this: in spite of the observation made above that Christian tradition was apparently transmitted in a manner analogous to that by which rabbinic tradition was transmitted, there is an important difference—namely, the mediator of the Christian tradition is not the teacher, the rabbi, as in rabbinic tradition, but the apostle as direct witness (1956, 72). Cullmann's second point is that 'the principle of succession does not work mechanically as with the rabbis, but is bound to the Holy Spirit' (1956, 72). G. E. Ladd has taken the discussion further. He underlines the significance of the dual nature of the tradition as kerygmatic-pneumatic: 'it is kerygmatic because it can be p. 123 perpetuated only as kerygma and received as a confession of faith. It is pneumatic because it can be received and preserved only by the enabling of the Spirit' (1970, 226). Moreover, we can now understand better how the tradition can be both a fixed and growing tradition. On the one hand, certain formulations of the gospel were regarded as dangerous deviations from the accepted core of fixed tradition and emphatically rejected as such; on the other hand, there was apparently an expectation that the apostles would be guided by the Holy Spirit in the task of adding to the tradition as the situation required and of interpreting the tradition—unfolding and elaborating on God's redemptive purpose in Christ. Indeed it was understood that the primary apostolic functions included not only the propagation of the tradition but also its preservation from corruption with human tradition (cf. [Col. 2:8](#)) and from distortion by false apostles who preached a Jesus other than that of the apostolic tradition.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Dunn, 1977, 29f for a basic summary of this 'common kerygma'.

<sup>22</sup> (1956, 66ff.) See, however, R. Y. K. Fung, 1985, 23–41(37). See too S. Kim, 1982, 67ff.; and J. H. Schuetz, 1975, 54ff.

<sup>23</sup> See Ladd, 1970, 228; also Schuyler Brown, 1984, 474–480.

## The traditions about Jesus

There is ample evidence in the Pauline letters that the apostle was familiar with various traditions of the works and words of Jesus.<sup>24</sup> However, there are two passages that are of special significance. In [1 Cor. 7](#), while dealing with various issues relating to marriage and singleness, the apostle makes a point which he buttresses with a quotation of a dominical ruling (vv. [10f.](#)). It is most likely that Paul is quoting from tradition;<sup>25</sup> it is interesting, however, to notice how Paul handles this tradition that he had received. To the dominical ruling: 'A wife must not separate from her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife' he first adds a gloss: 'But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband' and then proceeds to relate this teaching to the context of the Gentile mission, which had obviously not been in view in the original setting of Jesus' ministry. In other words, once more we see the apostle Paul adapting the tradition of Jesus' teaching to the context which he was addressing in his letter.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, it is important to note that Paul is careful to make a distinction between the points in his argument for which he could cite support from the tradition of Jesus' teaching and other points for which he could not cite a specific word. This is significant because it is assumed too easily in some scholarly circles that a large number of the sayings in the Jesus tradition are not authentic but are later creations by [p. 124](#) the church.<sup>27</sup> Sometimes this scepticism regarding the gospel tradition is related to the understanding of the role of prophets in the early church. James Dunn is representative of many scholars when he says 'The fact that so many traditions of Jesus' words and deeds were preserved indicates that they were treasured by the earliest communities ... and played an authoritative role in shaping their teaching and practice. But the traditions themselves were not thought of as already cast in a ... finally authoritative form, and their authority was subject to the adaptation and interpretation called forth by the prophetic Spirit in changing circumstances' (1977, 75). But Dunn also identifies various sayings in the gospels and which he labels as 'promises spoken in the name of the exalted Jesus by an early Christian prophet' or as 'prophetic interpretations' of other sayings.<sup>28</sup> Now it may be conceded that prophets and other teachers in the Christian community may have played a part in the process of adapting sayings of Jesus to the post-Easter situation by the church in a manner analogous to the pesher-technique employed at Qumran. Even so, in the words of David Hill, 'that is not the same thing as ascribing to them the creation *ex nihilo* of sayings of Jesus' (1974, 264).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See e.g. D. L. Dungan, 1971.

<sup>25</sup> Some scholars (e.g. Cullmann, 1956, 68; Dunn, 1977) argue on the basis of the present tense in this verse that Paul intends to say that it is the exalted Lord who addresses the Corinthians through the tradition. This seems rather unnecessary.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. K. Wegenast, 1978, 774: 'For Paul, tradition is not sacrosanct; this adjective can be applied only to the gospel, which is anterior to all tradition.' See too Dungan's treatment of this passage (1971, 81ff.).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. D. Guthrie, 'A careful examination of the variety of theories which have been proposed does not lead to a convincing conclusion that communities are likely to have created the core of the gospel material. It would be necessary, first, to demonstrate that communities do create traditions, which confirm what they have already come to believe, but this has never been done' (1986, 19).

<sup>28</sup> (1977, 74). This scepticism is to a large extent associated with R. Bultmann, 1968, 127f. and others who follow him like N. Perrin, 1967, 15; and Kasemann, 1969, 66–81. See also W. R. Farmer, 1982, 63–66.

<sup>29</sup> David Hill's conclusion is worth quoting: 'The evidence produced and repeated in support of the contention that the Christian prophets played a creative role in respect of sayings later attributed to the

The other passage that is of relevance to our discussion is Paul's quotation of the tradition of the institution of the Lord's Supper in [1 Cor. 11:23ff](#). In this passage Paul uses the standard terminology relating to traditional teaching—'I received ... what I also passed on to you'—indicating quite clearly that what follows is part of the Jesus tradition. A comparison of Paul's account with those in the synoptic gospels confirms some of the conclusions already reached above—namely, that although there is a fixed core of tradition, there is evidence of both interpretative additions as well as conflation.<sup>30</sup> However, we need to consider further the significance of Paul saying that he had received this 'from the Lord' (*apo tou kyriou*). Now the most obvious meaning is that Paul sees the earthly Jesus as the ultimate source of this tradition. However, there appears to be a growing scholarly consensus that what these words signify is that the authority for the tradition being quoted is not so much the earthly Jesus as the exalted Lord.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the person who has done most to bring about this change in scholarly opinion is Oscar Cullmann (1956, 67f.). He says, 'The formula in [1 Cor. 11:23](#) refers to the Christ who is present, in that he stands behind the transmission of the tradition, that is, he works in it. It is the united testimony of all the apostles which constitutes the Christian *paradosis*, in which the *Kyrios* himself is at work' (ibid, 68). On the basis of [2 Cor. 3:18](#) Cullmann goes on to argue that it is precisely because the Jesus tradition was transmitted by the apostles under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit who is identical with the exalted Lord that this tradition is actually contrasted with human tradition in various texts.

Not all that Cullmann holds has been accepted by other scholars. However, his interpretation of [1 Cor. 11:23](#) as a reference to the tradition being authorized by the exalted Lord has been widely accepted. Even some of those who still hold the older interpretation allow also for this newer interpretation of this text.<sup>32</sup> If this is a correct way of understanding the text, then it is a valid conclusion that 'it was due to the office of the apostolate that the link between the Crucified and the Exalted, between the earthly Jesus and the Christ of the proclamation, was preserved'.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, we have learned a lot about how the traditions about Jesus were regarded and handled in the early church from the critical study of the gospels. We know now that during the early period these traditions were used in various contexts in the life of the church—in its preaching and worship,<sup>34</sup> controversy,<sup>35</sup> and in the instruction of its members.<sup>36</sup> We also have a good understanding of how both the narrative traditions of Jesus as well as the traditions of his teaching were both preserved and shaped in the course of transmission. In summary, there is clear evidence, on the one hand, that the message of the earthly Jesus was seen by the early churches as having a continuing

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earthly Jesus proves, on examination, to be lacking in substance and authority.' (1974, 273). See too the comments of G. Fee, 1987, 292 n.8.

<sup>30</sup> See Bruce, 1970, 33–36.

<sup>31</sup> See Dunn, 1977, 67; Bruce, 1970, 33.

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. G. Fee, 1987, 548f.: 'Paul probably means ... that Jesus himself is the ultimate source of the tradition. It may also be that latent in such language is his understanding that the Lord, now risen and exalted, is still responsible by his Spirit for the transmission of such tradition within the church.'

<sup>33</sup> D. Mueller, 1986, 135.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. M. Dibelius, 1934, 17ff; C. H. Dodd, 1944<sup>2</sup>, 17ff.

<sup>35</sup> Form critics have drawn our attention to the controversies in which the early Christians engaged as a formative factor in the growth of the gospel tradition. See e.g. R. Bultmann, 1963, 39ff.

<sup>36</sup> See Bruce, 1970, 65ff.; Dunn, 1977, 145.

importance for them. On the other hand, it was authoritative for them only as interpreted tradition. Therefore, Dunn is fully justified in concluding that the authority of the tradition lay 'not in its historical point of origin so much as in the fact that it was spoken by the one who was now present as Lord of the community and that it could be regarded as expressing his present will' (1977, 78).

### **The ethical tradition**

In several of his letters the apostle Paul exhorts his readers by appealing to 'the traditions' that he had passed on to them (cf. [1 Cor. 11:2](#); [Phil. 4:9](#); [Col. 2:6](#); [1 Thess. 4:1](#); [2 Thess. 2:15](#); [3:6](#)). Besides the kerygmatic and historical traditions that [p. 126](#) we have already considered, there was apparently a wide range of ethical and moral instruction included in these traditions. An analysis of this catechetical material has revealed that much of it was based on the traditions of Jesus' teaching and ministry.<sup>37</sup> It is interesting, however, that it is not very often that the earthly Jesus is appealed to as a model for behaviour. Rather, the apostle appeals to his own example, even as he follows the example of Christ (cf. [1 Cor. 4:17](#); [11:1](#); [Phil. 3:17](#)). There have been various suggested explanations of this, but perhaps the most plausible is that it is related to Paul's apostolic selfunderstanding. 'Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice' ([Phil. 4:9](#)). And like the appeal to his message, the appeal to follow his example carries force only to the extent to which he follows Christ.<sup>38</sup>

### **Tradition in the Pastorals and later New Testament writings**

It is evident that the attitude to tradition in the Pastorals is somewhat different from that in the main letters of the Pauline corpus. The terminology used to refer to the apostolic tradition is different,<sup>39</sup> and the primary concern now is to keep, hold firmly to, and guard the teaching that has been entrusted to their care. The process of using, adapting and interpreting the tradition is coming to an end, or, perhaps, is over; in fact, the very terms *paradosis* (tradition) and *paradidomi* (pass on) are replaced by the terms *paratheke* (deposit) and *paratithemai* (entrust). It would appear that the tradition is well on its way to becoming crystallized into set forms.

Of the other New Testament writings, however, it would appear that it is only in Jude and 2 Peter that this stage in the development of the tradition has been reached. In Jude there is reference to '(contending) for the faith that God has once for all entrusted to the saints' (v. [3](#)) and in 2 Peter to '(being firmly established) in the truth you now have' ([1:12](#) cf. [3:2](#)). However, it needs to be said that it hardly would be a fair assessment of the evidence to refer to the understanding of the tradition even in these books in terms of the 'rule of faith' of Early Catholicism.

Also, the community's role in preserving the tradition must be recognized. To begin with, there were the original eye-witnesses, the apostles themselves, to check and correct the oral traditions in the churches; in due course, this apostolic witness was put down in writings, and the process of building up a recognized body of writings began. Until such time that there was such a body of accredited writings, the community had no alternative

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Hunter, 1961, 52–57; 128–131; Dodd, 1968, 11–29; Riesenfeld, 1970, 1–29 (17); Dunn, 1977, 68f. See too the interesting article on 'the Holy Word' by J. Arthur Baird, 1987, 585–599.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. W. P. De Boer, 1962; also J. L. White, 1983, 433–444 (441).

<sup>39</sup> See Dunn, 1977, 69 for a summary. However, it is still going beyond the evidence to conclude that there is by this time a recognized body of tradition which has been accepted as the test of orthodoxy.

but to be responsible for ensuring the essential accuracy of the tradition. This is reflected in the appeal to ‘the Lord and the p. 127 Apostles’ in the early Apostolic Fathers.<sup>40</sup>

### **Tradition and Interpretation**

In his analysis of the early Christian preaching, C. H. Dodd identified the fulfilment of the Jewish scriptures as one of the recurring themes. This insight has been confirmed by other studies, and developed further. ‘What they (the early Christians) sought in the ancient scriptures was not a code of commandments to regulate daily living, but a testimony to Christ and his gospel; and their whole interpretation was governed by the conviction that in him the scriptures were fulfilled.’<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, even their interpretation of scripture was, in the ultimate analysis, subordinate to the apostolic witness to Christ. This is important, because the contention of some scholars that narratives were created to establish the fulfilment of scripture has not been established.<sup>42</sup>

## **III. THE APOSTOLIC TRADITION AND THE NT CANON**

The advance of history and the lapse of time made it necessary, in due course, for the church to determine its doctrinal norm by forming a Canon. Now there is a lack of consensus among scholars regarding whether apostolicity—apostolic authority, if not apostolic authorship—was an important criterion of New Testament canonicity. However, the fact that by the time the process was completed, ‘every document that could colourably be called apostolic found its place’<sup>43</sup> in the canon testifies to the attitude in the church to the apostolic witness to Christ. The evidence clearly supports Cullmann’s contention that ‘the fixing of the Christian canon of scripture means that the church itself, at a given time, traced a clear and definite line of demarcation between the period of the apostles and that of the church, between the time of foundation and that of construction, between the apostolic tradition and ... ecclesiastical tradition’ (1956, 89). And R. P. C. Hanson makes a further point. ‘If it is accepted’ he says, ‘that the primary function of the books of the New Testament is, and always was, ... to act as evidence (to the historical events of Christ’s life, death and resurrection), ... then the conclusion is inescapable that in forming the Canon of the New Testament the Church put itself under the authority of the New Testament’s witness and abdicated its right of adding or subtracting from this witness’ (1962, 235).

James Dunn (1977, 374ff) in seeking to answer the query, ‘Has the canon a continuing function?’ has some extremely useful comments to make. The New Testament canonizes the range of acceptable diversity of Christianity but also the limits of acceptable diversity. ‘If the conviction that God meets us now through p. 128 the one who was Jesus of Nazareth marks the beginning and heart of Christianity’ (p. 387)<sup>44</sup>. It also serves as canon in that

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<sup>40</sup> See C. F. Moule, 1966, 178–209 (182); D. A. Dunbar, 1987, 323ff.; J. L. White, 1983, 433–444 (437); also D. M. Bossman, 1987, 3–9.

<sup>41</sup> F. W. Beare, 1962, 520–532 (521); Bruce, 1970, 74–86; C. K. Barrett, 1973, 1–23 (16); R. N. Longenecker, 1975, *passim*. But see the reservations expressed by W. C. Kaiser, Jr., 1985, 228.

<sup>42</sup> On this see Moule, 1966, 63–85 (84).

<sup>43</sup> F. F. Bruce, 1970, 138.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. too H. Y. Gamble, 1985, 92: ‘The boundaries of the canon rule out certain particular interpretations and some types of interpretation, but the same boundaries encompass a range of other interpretations.’

through it alone we have access to the events which determined the character of Christianity. 'The portraits of Jesus and statements of Jesus which we find in the NT are normative, not in themselves but in the sense that only in and through these portraits can we see the man behind them, only in and through these statements can we encounter the original reality of the Christ-event' (ibid.).<sup>45</sup>

The church will always have the task of interpreting the biblical message in contemporary and contextual categories. And it is promised the help of the same Holy Spirit who inspired the apostolic witness. In this sense, church tradition stands in the same line of development as the apostolic tradition. However, there is a crucial difference. In translating scripture into the language of today, the church is fulfilling its duty for its own period, and is not doing something which binds all future generations in the same way that scripture does. 'Only the traditions of the New Testament can serve as a norm for the authenticity of what we call Christian, only they can fill the word "Jesus" with authoritative meaning' (Dunn, 1977, 383).

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Thus the canon is a compromise between the single and specific ground of faith—the Christevent—and the multiplicity of its interpretive appropriations.'

<sup>45</sup> Bartlett, 1983, 217: 'Tradition is a defense in the church against individualism in interpretation. Tradition cannot and should not prevent new insight from edifying the church, but it can and should have a voice in evaluating its reliability.'

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# III

## Scripture and Tradition in the Orthodox Church

James Stamoolis

### ORTHODOXY AS THE TRUE CHURCH

The concept of being the true Christian church is the dominant theme of Eastern Christendom. 'Orthodoxy is the Church of Christ on earth.'<sup>1</sup> There is a strong, even overpowering sense of tradition that envelops the whole body of believers.<sup>2</sup> This awareness is a mark that affects everything about the church. Panagiotis Bratsiotis asserts that the fundamental principle of Orthodoxy is 'the idea that the Orthodox Church adheres to the principles and piety of *early, undivided Catholic Church*'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Morehouse Publishing Co., 1935), p. 9. This is the opening sentence of Bulgakov's work on the church.

<sup>2</sup> This concept is stressed in teaching Orthodox youth about their church. There is an emphasis on being the true church. Cf. the Sunday School manual by Stan W. Carlson and Leonid Soroka entitled *Faith of Our Fathers* (Minneapolis: Olympic Press, 1962), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Fundamental Principles and Main Characteristics of the Orthodox Church,' in *The Orthodox Ethos*, ed., by A. J. Phyllippou (Oxford: Holywell Press, 1964), p. 24.