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How I Use Tradition In Doing Theology

by Clark H. Pinnock

I have a dilemma. Given the challenge of religious liberalism, how do I remain evangelical without becoming Catholic? In the face of Catholicism, how do I remain evangelical without becoming liberal? This dilemma raises the important question of what role tradition plays in my theology.

Anyone's view of tradition fits into the pattern of his or her theology as a whole. Yet because I am a Baptist and conservative Protestant, tradition is a factor which affects me without my giving much attention to it. Therefore it is very important to make a point of examining it. Because I do theology as a conservative evangelical, I affirm a divine truth disclosure which culminated in the Christ event and became deposited in the Holy Scriptures. With Calvin I believe that the Bible possesses a unique authority and that it ought to rule the church and its theology. Although I would admit that the Bible is itself tradition in some sense, I would want to distinguish it from other traditions as being paradigmatic and foundational. For this reason I prefer to use "tradition" to refer to

extra-biblical material, such as the dogmatic formulations, catachesis, and liturgies of the churches. In my theology I want to do justice both to the supremacy of Scripture and to the heritage of Christian experience and reflection.

In essence, then, I take the Bible to be the divinely inspired and normative deposit of the truth of the Christian revelation, magisterial in its authority (*norma normans*), and tradition to be human interpretation in the historical process of transmission, ministerial in function (*norma normata*). Ideally the Bible and tradition are two complementary sides of Christian truth becoming effective in history. It would be wonderful if there could always be a perfect unity between them, if text and its interpretation were always to move along on the same lines. But it was not so in the days of our Lord, and it has not been so since then. Jesus found it necessary on occasion to contradict the tradition of the elders and appeal to the written Word of God. He seemed to make a distinction between the Scriptures, which are divine in origin, and tradition, which was not. When the ideal unity of Scripture and tradition breaks down, priority must be given to Scripture.

Two factors in our present theological context place pressure on this view of tradition in doing theology. First, the four-century-old challenge

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of Catholicism appears to subordinate Scripture to tradition as interpreted by the magisterium, robbing it of the freedom I think it ought to have. Second, the more recent challenge of religious liberalism presents us with a wave of novel conceptions often hostile to tradition but claiming to be in some way original and scriptural. The first challenge makes me want to emphasise the critical function of the Bible in preventing unsatisfactory accretions, while the second makes me warm up to tradition as never before. Thus my dilemma: how to remain evangelical without becoming Catholic or liberal.

How I try to deal with this dilemma will, I hope, become clear in what follows.

The Roman Catholic Challenge

It has always seemed to the Protestant theologian that the Catholic Church wishes to absolutize tradition and its own teaching authority as if it were the Word of God on a par with and even over the Bible. This suspicion, never wholly cleared up, accounts for what has been called the "sola scriptura" emphasis, or the belief in the supremacy of Scripture. In their opposition to traditionalism, Protestants have often spoken as if they had no positive appreciation for tradition. In fact, of course, we do (which is why I do not like the phrase "sola scriptura"). The Reformers themselves, for example, were close students of the fathers and were loyal to the ecumenical creeds. Aware that Scripture is never in fact "alone," they even drew up confessions of their own to guide the Bible reader and help him or her understand it aright. Although grateful for the work of people like Augustine and Jerome, the Reformers did not suppose such men were in total agreement with themselves nor consider them infallible. They made a sharp distinction between what Scripture taught and what these men said.¹ What worried them was the possible introduction of novel doctrines and corrupt traditions which were contrary to the Bible into the teaching of the church.² For example, Article 22 of the Thirty-nine Articles concludes that "the Romish doctrine concerning purgatory, pardons, worshipping and adoration, as well as of images as of relics, and also invocation of saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God." A modern example would be the doctrine of the bodily assumption of Mary, which is not required by Scripture and thus not binding upon Christians.

Let Scripture be heard and never silenced, and let its word be accorded a respect granted no other source. Tradition deserves respect, but tradition does not speak with a single voice and all that it says is not of equal worth. In addition, tradition can be deadening and distorting, and needs the life and truth found in the canon of Scripture. The church always needs to be reformed, as Kung points out following the Reformers, by referring back to the apostolic foundations found in the New Testament. Only in this way will the church's mark of apostolicity be credible.³ In theology this means that I strive to achieve the fairest and purest testimony to the gospel that I can.

At this point Rahner finds a material difference between Catholic and Protestant theology.⁴ The living church which interprets the Bible is the authority Catholic theology must rely on in practice—not the Bible text apart from the context of the Catholic Church. Although admitting paradoxically the material sufficiency and normative authority of the Bible, Rahner finds the actual authority to reside nevertheless in the magisterium which infallibly interprets both Scripture and the developing tradition. Since the Bible and tradition are difficult to understand, it is left to the Roman teaching office to inform us about the content of faith. It would seem then that Protestants are mistaken to think that what divides us from Catholics is their placing tradition over Scripture; in fact what divides us is their putting the magisterium over both. The problem appears to boil down to the authority of the Petrine office. Small wonder that Rahner called Kung a Protestant as soon as the latter raised his voice against the infallibility of that office. To me, affirming the material sufficiency of Scripture means that the whole church, Catholic as well as Protestant, Roman magisterium as well as theological journal, ought to place itself beneath the judgment of the written Word of God. Creeds and tradition are not valid because the church teaches them but because they agree with Scripture. As Luther said of the Apostles' Creed, "This confession of faith we did not make or invent, neither did the fathers of the church before us. But as the bee gathers honey from many a beautiful and delectable flower, so this creed has been collected

in commendable brevity from the books of the beloved prophets and apostles, that is, from the entire Holy Scriptures."⁵ What practical meaning does it have to profess the material sufficiency of Scripture and then refuse to let it function?

It does not follow from this, however, that I have no appreciation for the usefulness of a teaching office. Did not Luther, who rejected the Roman teaching office, become the authoritative guide to a host of Lutherans since? Who shall decide what the true gospel is, and how shall it be decided? Obviously this cannot be left to the individual expert or persuasive leader, any more than it can be left to the Roman magisterium. What is needed is a voice which can gather together the insights of the fully ecumenical experience of the people of God and exercise an office clearly subservient to the Scriptures, relying upon a teaching charism in the churches which listens to the text in a responsible way. This teaching office would, for example, need to heed the various lines of the rich and complex scriptural teaching on particular themes and ensure that the resulting interpretations cohere with and complement the full range of data. Such an ecumenical teaching office does not now exist, of course. The Faith and Order section of the World Council of Churches is an attempt in embryo to achieve it, and may even be the seed from which such a ministry could grow.

I agree with the Catholic that the divorce between Scripture and tradition/church is a sad fact of life. It is tragic and unnatural, and ought never to have happened. Despite any reform it brought to the church, it sowed the seeds of division and of a sectarian spirit which is the infamy of Protestants. Yet the blame cannot be levelled only in one direction. The prophets cannot be blamed for sowing division when they indicted Old Testament Israel for forsaking the Law of God and the terms of the covenant. The answer to "sola scriptura" cannot be "sola ecclesia," thus silencing the critique and covering up the sin. The freedom of the Word of God cannot be bound simply because it might create division and opportunities to sin. It is the sin of the church, our sin, which causes Scripture to stand over against tradition on occasion. Jesus warned that his true word would divide people from one another. Precious though the unity of the church is, it is not worth much if it is based upon a sub-Christian version of what the gospel is. Because the church is not perfect it requires the check provided for us in the Bible. It cannot serve as a check unto itself. It is my prayer that the Holy Spirit would guide the

The recent challenge of religious liberalism makes me warm up to tradition as never before.

church back to the Scriptures, this time renewing not only segments but the whole. There are even times when I think I see it happening—in Geneva, in Lausanne, in ecumenical doctrinal agreements, and in charismatic renewal. I do not believe that God will allow his truth to be lost, but am confident that he will bring us all together beneath the Scriptures. Then Scripture and tradition will again be one.

The Loss of Tradition

The effect of this controversy upon my own theology has been to cause me to neglect tradition. The natural reaction to being pressed by traditionalism is to wash one's hands of tradition as well. Thus the Catholic charge of "sola scriptura" becomes true in a way it ought not to. It is as if bewitched by my own language and pressed by a sharp challenge, I respond by doing tradition a real injustice. It makes me tend to forget that the church is a pillar and ground of the truth, and that Protestant as well as Catholic beliefs are ecclesiastically shaped. It makes me tend to suppose that in my theology I go directly and immediately back to the Bible, unaware of the fact that I read the Word in the context of a Christian community through which the message has been transmitted to me. Particularly as a Baptist, I find I have to remind myself that tradition is the process of interpreting and transmitting the

Word. It is not simply the history of deformation, but more often it is the history of heroic hermeneutical achievement. Therefore, in a doctrine such as the person and work of Christ, it is fruitful to review the options which present themselves in creed and document, in liturgies and prayer, and let them shape my own understanding even while seeking to hear the Bible. As Chesterton remarked, tradition means giving my great-grandfather a vote. The richness of traditional wisdom can only deepen one's own reflections and serve as a corrective to false moves in interpretation which from time to time threaten the truth.⁶ (see Berkhof, pp. 91–100).

Related to this error of neglecting tradition is also a certain lack of appreciation for historicity in a broader sense. One cannot say that the Reformers, or many pre-moderns for that matter, were much aware of development of doctrine. Since they tended to think, as modern conservatives also do, that their convictions were pure distillations of scriptural teachings, they did not reflect upon the historical factors that entered into their interpretation. They thought they were simply reading the Bible, but in fact they were reading it with a view to answering various contemporary rivals. All doctrine is at least to some extent a historically conditioned response to the questions on the agendas of particular times and places. Recognising this now compels me to be more self-critical about my truth and to remain always open to re-evaluate my convictions in the light of fresh discovery and deeper insight. I do not believe that historicity relativises dogmatics, but it does make me aware that the work of theology can never be finished. Theology points forward to a future unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God.⁷

At this point I ought to admit that appealing to the Bible as check and arbiter has become more difficult in recent times due to a series of questions raised about the Bible by critical study. Even though they largely arose at first from the ranks of liberal Protestant theology, they have be-

The answer to “sola scriptura” cannot be “sola Ecclesia,” thus silencing the critique and covering up the sin.

come part of the Catholic case against the historic Protestant view. One can see this in Rahner. He points out that “sola scriptura” is self-contradictory because the old doctrine of verbal inspiration on which it rested has been shown to be untenable.⁸ Thus he uses liberal Protestant criticism to overturn classical Protestant method in theology by identifying with a modern view of the Bible which is as opposed to the traditional Catholic understanding as to our own. Perhaps this also indicates a certain common cause shared by the Catholic and liberal Protestant in wishing to undercut classical Protestant theology. I admit that it is unnerving to think of an alliance of the best Catholic and liberal Protestant theologians united against my own treasured evangelical beliefs. It is somewhat relieved by another alliance that is shaping up between classical Catholics and classical Protestants to meet precisely this new development. More about that later.

These are some of the questions which seem to make appealing to the Bible more difficult: do we not approach the Bible with a “discrimen” that determines how we appeal to it as an authority?⁹ Is there not a much greater diversity of teachings in it than conservative Protestants have been willing to admit? Does this not make it impossible to appeal to Scripture for a clear-cut doctrine of anything?¹⁰ Has higher criticism not discredited parts of the Bible, thus making it improper to appeal to them? While I think all such questions can be answered, I am aware how much harder it is to follow the method I espouse than it was for those who did not feel the burden of such questions. If we are to continue to follow a scriptural method in theology responsibly, and to make it seem feasible to those not yet convinced, harder work than has yet been done will be necessary.

At the beginning I posed the question, how does one remain evangelical without becoming liberal in the face of the Catholic challenge? My answer is the same one the Reformation nearly always gave: by maintaining the supremacy of Scripture in balance with a healthy respect for the interpretive transmission which is tradition; that is, by keeping the *norma normans* in proximity with the *norma normata*.

The Challenge of Religious Liberalism

At quite the opposite extreme from Catholicism, religious liberalism is characterised by a revolt against tradition. Far from absolutising it, religious liberals tend to minimise and depreciate tradition because they do not wish to be bound by it. Tradition, after all, embodies the old Christian way of thinking about God, Christ, the Bible, and so forth. Religious liberalism insists that we should not be constrained by such categories, but should be free to follow our own best human lights.

I do see in religious liberalism a marvelously creative hermeneutical and apologetic movement which has enriched theology. But it has enriched it the way all great heresies do, by stimulating orthodoxy to pursue questions it had left dormant and to come up with a more adequate presentation of its own truth.

In essence, religious liberalism represents a wholesale revision of practically the whole of traditional theology. Its rapprochement with modernity requires it to break with the classical Christian mind and reconceive theology in radically different ways. It is essentially the attempt to release modern people from tutelage to ecclesiastical dogma and authority. With Harnack¹¹ liberalism tries to see Christianity in non-doctrinal terms. It views the history of dogma as the history of the changing views of Christians, which are not binding upon us. The true identity of Christianity lies not in doctrinal continuity but in some continuity of spirit or attitude to life. Harnack wrote his history of dogma precisely to demonstrate that early dogma perverted the original simple faith of Jesus (which had nothing to do with the ontological mysteries of Greek theology). He hoped to free Christians from having to conform their thought to such dogmas, so that they could get back to the simple spiritual and ethical gospel he himself espoused.

I am aware, of course, that few now agree with Harnack about his supposedly original gospel, but I would still insist that his antipathy to traditional doctrinal standards is as alive as it ever was. It would be impossible to list all those who agree with him that traditional and scriptural beliefs today are incredible and outdated. It may, for example, be possible to honour Jesus in some dynamic or functional way, but it is not possible to see him the way Nicea did. On every hand we hear that such ideas are historically conditioned sentiments requiring constant modification and updating—almost as often from progressive Catholics as from liberal Protestants (the new alliance again). Of course not many follow Loisy's lead and announce their disbelief in all articles save the one referring to Jesus' crucifixion under Pontius Pilate; the current way is to affirm the ancient formulas but replace them with a quite different theory, calling it something like a “dynamic equivalence.” One can by this means deny the old formulation while claiming to uphold the truth of it.

Again, I am somewhat aware of the factors which have led to this revolution against tradition. These include the new view of the Bible as human tradition, the existentialist notion that truth is subjective in nature and not intellectually objectifiable, the cultural relativism which announces a great chasm between ancient convictions and modern possibilities of belief, and the superior importance of praxis over theory. But still the fact is that religious liberalism is basically a revolt against tradition and is very much alive today.

The Recovery of Tradition

This challenge influences my theology by reawakening in me a deep respect for tradition as an interpretive guide and doctrinal safeguard. Thus the catholic side of conservative Protestant thought comes into focus. In appealing for a return to the Bible, Protestants have never intended to forsake the great doctrinal traditions surrounding the nature of God, the person of Christ, human need, or the sacrifice on the cross. This is obvious from any reading of the Protestant confessions of faith, which reiterate the basic intellectual pillars of the classical Christian consensus. Protestants agreed with Catholics that the creeds were fixed landmarks of sound theology which would never be shaken or surpassed. “Sola scriptura” never did mean bypassing the tradition in this radical sense. Lutherans, Calvinists, and even Baptists drew up their confessional documents in order to prevent biblical and traditional convictions from being washed away in a flood of novel and private interpretation.¹²

Although the Baptists often make pretence of adhering to the Bible only, even they draw up such confessions with great regularity; when

they do not, they still operate with covert doctrinal standards, normally conservative. They do, however, open themselves unwittingly to religious liberalism in their position on believers' baptism, because at that point they reject a very broad and ancient tradition in the church of baptising infants. By not following Luther's example and accepting the practice because it was a firm tradition, they invite the question, why accept ancient traditions in other areas? If the tradition is deemed to be mistaken at this point, why not at others also? This may explain why Baptists have staffed the ranks of religious liberalism to an impressive degree.¹³ My own feeling as a conservative Baptist would be that the biblical evidence and the current consensus on infant baptism is so precarious that it bears little comparison to matters like the trinity of God or the theanthropic person of Christ. But I would grant that the more one critiques tradition the less one can then appeal to it to settle controverted points.

Today one can see in many places catholicising of evangelicalism as a result of liberal pressure. I recently received notice of a further con-vo-cation of Catholics and Evangelicals to discuss common concerns. There was the Chicago Call, and the founding of the Evangelical Orthodox Church. There are new journals starting like the *New Oxford Review*, and new confessional statements like the one on biblical inerrancy by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. It should be obvious to us all that we are seeing evangelicals returning to the idea of a rule of faith and to forms of ecclesiastical authority. They are doing this for the same reason the church did in the early centuries — in response to what is perceived as a menacing threat. Authors like Robert Webber and Thomas Oden are calling evangelicals to look to the early church for the resources with which to counter apostasy in the church. They are urging us to grasp the threefold cord of Scripture, rule of faith, and church authority in order to meet the challenges of today.

Recognising the historically conditioned nature of doctrine compels me to remain always open to re-evaluate my convictions in the light of fresh discovery and deeper insight.

Now it becomes apparent why I posed the second question: can one remain evangelical without becoming Catholic in light of the challenge of religious liberalism? To take an example, biblical criticism has uncovered such pluralism in the Bible's teaching that it is much harder to support the evangelical confession simply by appealing to it. James Dunn himself predicted that, as a result of seeing this, orthodoxy would have to look for a canon beyond the canon to support its stand.¹⁴ In order to have the Bible teach the "right things," it will be necessary to state those convictions in documents appended to it. (Consider the Scofield Bible and its notes which ensure the correct interpretation, or the function of the Watchtower publications among Jehovah's Witnesses.) Indeed it does appear that evangelicalism is very catholic.

But this is really not so surprising or innovative. Protestants have always had their confessions of faith in order to preserve the church from strange teachings. Today the church is being flooded by a strange new world of Bible theories. Each publishing season one is greeted with many novel interpretations which the ordinary believer is not able to assess. Tradition serves in this case to insulate the community from the fire storms of theological speculation, and gives her teachers time to de-

vis appropriate defensive strategies. Often these theories do not even last long enough to require refutation. But because Scripture can be twisted, it is important to protect the church from teachers who do so. Measures such as confessional statements are not infallible norms competing with the Bible in our estimation, but protective barriers to save the flock of God from undue stress while its overseers can work out their replies.

Obviously such replies will have to be made if the witness based on the supremacy of Scripture is to remain credible. Tradition can help protect the evangelical faith, but it cannot ground it. Eventually the specific challenges must be answered. For example, is Harnack right or wrong about the importance of doctrine to original Christianity? We must be able to make good our claim that true Christianity is a doctrinal religion based upon revealed truth. Is Dunn right or wrong that the New Testament teaches such a variety of contradictory theologies that an orthodox understanding becomes impossible? We must take up the challenge and show both that the message is much more unified than he allows and that it is in fact evangelical. Besides forcing us to do a lot of hard work, I think this task will nourish the catholic side of evangelicalism. For example, it will tend to make us more interested in church history than we used to be, and make us more respectful of traditions we had not thought much about. It will even result in a few crossing over to Rome, as Sheldon Vanauken did, but I suspect not in large numbers.

Conclusion

As a conservative Protestant I see essentially the same challenge coming from Roman Catholicism and religious liberalism, though from opposite sides. The challenge is to the supremacy of scriptural truth, to the apostolicity of the church. Both movements wish to replace the teaching of Scripture with human tradition, whether ancient or modern. The truth of Scripture must be protected in the face of Catholicism by opposing it to traditionalism, but in the face of religious liberalism with the aid of tradition. I myself take Scripture and tradition to be part of a dialectic, serving one another mutually, a dialectic in which the Bible is the paradigm and tradition the distillation of the church's reflections upon it. I do not think the Bible is a magic talisman which can be easily invoked to resolve deep issues of controversy in the church. But I do believe it has served as a source of truth and life in the church from the beginning, guiding, correcting and liberating us. I trust it will go on doing so until Christ returns.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹See Philip Hughes, *The Theology of the English Reformation* (Baker, 1980), pp. 30-38.
- ²For Luther, see Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Fortress, 1966), p. 6; and for Calvin see much polemic in the *Institutes*, book IV.
- ³Hans Kung, *The Church* (Doubleday, 1976), p. 46.
- ⁴Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (Crossroad, 1978), p. 361.
- ⁵Trinity Sunday sermon, 1535.
- ⁶See Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith* (Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 91-100.
- ⁷Peter Toon is an evangelical much more aware of such factors than most. See *The Development of Doctrine in the Church* (Eerdmans, 1979).
- ⁸Rahner, *Foundations*, p. 362.
- ⁹David Kelsey, *Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Fortress, 1975).
- ¹⁰J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Westminster, 1977).
- ¹¹Adolph Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (Peter Smith, 1958).
- ¹²See John Skilton, *Scripture and Confession* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973).
- ¹³See William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Harvard, 1976).
- ¹⁴Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, p. 380.

CORRECTION OF THEMELIOS ADDRESS CHANGE

In our May/June issue last spring we reported that the subscription address for *Themelios* was changing. This is incorrect. *Themelios* subscriptions will continue to be serviced by the TSF office in Madison. Although *TSF Bulletin* and *Themelios* can now be ordered separately, they both have the same address. Please send subscriptions and address changes to TSF Subscriptions, 233 Langdon, Madison, WI 53703.

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