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FOREWORD

Essays in the previous issue of the Faculty Bulletin focused on the Christian moral vision and the identity of the early church as a moral community. It was argued that faithful lives commended Christianity to many in the ancient world.

In T. R. Glover's phrase, however, the early Christians not only "out-lived and out-died" their pagan opponents; they also "out-thought" them. From the outset the church was involved in teaching and interpreting the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. Thus the church was not only a moral community; it was also a teaching community--and its teaching anchored its morality.

In the emerging "therapeutic society" it is vital that the church resist the temptation to become "relevant" and "practical" to the neglect of the task of instructing believers in basic Christian beliefs. The following essays reflect upon various aspects of the church as a teaching community.

Once again, appreciation is owed to Mrs. Nancy Tindel, Faculty Secretary, for her work in preparing the manuscripts.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

PASSING ON THE TRADITION

By Paul L. Watson

The previous issue of the Faculty Bulletin examined the church as a moral community. My own contribution to that issue suggested that Israel's fundamental moral orientation came from Yahweh, who had called her to be his people, and from what it meant to be the "people of God." In this article I wish to raise and at least partially answer the question, how did Israel become and remain "the people of God" from generation to generation? Theologically, of course, the answer is they were called into being and sustained by Yahweh's grace. But on a more mundane level, how did the community maintain its identity from year to year, generation to generation, epoch to epoch?

Part, but certainly not all, of the answer to that question lies in the process of traditioning. By "traditioning" I mean the handing on of both the substance and the significance of the community's beliefs and practices from older to younger, from the more experienced to the less experienced. Most families have any number of customs and practices connected with the observance of holidays and birthdays, places to go on

vacations, and the like. When children ask why such things are done, the answer inevitably comes, “Our family has always done it that way” or “Your great-grandfather started this years ago.” In other words, the practices (and, for that matter, the beliefs and values) of a family have a history, i.e. a story, behind them. That story both explains and legitimizes the present.

That, this traditioning process took place in the early church is clear from Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I received, that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Paul is saying, in effect, “as I have been ‘traditioned,’ so I ‘traditioned’ you.” Notice, too, that “tradition” here is not the antonym for God’s commands. It is not being used in the negative sense of “the tradition of men” (Mark 7:8) but in the positive sense of 2 Thessalonians 2:15. Thus Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 15 that the tradition catches up and passes on the very heart of the Christian faith, viz., the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Furthermore, this traditioning process did not originate with the early Christians. Its roots go back to the Old Testament, to which we now turn.

The Tradition Binds Up the Past

One cogent example of the traditioning process at work in Israel is found in Deuteronomy 5:28-33, in Moses’ exhortation to the people before his death and their

entrance into Canaan:

And the LORD heard your words; when you spoke to me; and the LORD said to me, ‘I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you; they have rightly said all that they have spoken. Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their children forever! Go and say to them, “Return to your tents.” But you, stand here by me, and I will tell you all the commandments and the statutes and the ordinances which you shall teach them, that they may do them in the land which I give them to possess.’ You shall be careful to do therefore as the LORD your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in all the way which the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land which you shall possess.

The process is clear in verse 31: From Yahweh to Moses, from Moses to the people, from the people to their children. The goal of the traditioning is also clear: A “way” in which they and their children may “walk” safely and securely. The blessings for walking in this way (perpetuating the tradition) are three-fold: You will live well ; you will live long (verse 33). By contrast, to forget the tradition is to get off the path and fall into ruin:

Thus says the LORD:
 “Stand by the roads, and look,
 and ask for the ancient paths,
 where the good way is; and walk in it,
 and find rest for your souls.
 But they said, ‘We will not walk in it’” (Jer. 6:16).

Note, however, that this is not an appeal to some mindless recapitulation of the past but a knowing where to go by knowing where they have been.

It is also instructive to note that the tradition is not solely, not even primarily, the “laws.” Rather, the tradition is fundamentally the story of what God has done with and for Israel up to the present moment:

When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which the LORD our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt; and the LORD brought us out with a mighty hand; and the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes; and he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land which he swore to give to our fathers’ (Deut. 6:20-23).

The story must, be told and appropriated first. Then come the statutes and the ordinances, which arise directly from the story itself and cannot be understood apart from it.

The Tradition Interprets the Present

The story is not something that happened only in the past to one specific generation. Instead, all generations participate in it: “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt; and the LORD brought us out.” In the words of Robert Lischer (A Theology of Preaching, p. 37), the story “deepens and enlarges the hearer’s sense of history . . . by personalizing it.” It is no longer a story, or their story, but my story. And the story is not just mine in the sense that it happened to my ancestors, but mine in that I am drawn into the story to live it out in my own life. I do not simply reproduce or clone the story, of course; but I live it in my own particular way, time, and circumstances.

Still another instructive passage from Deuteronomy in this regard concerns the

Feast of Tabernacles (Deut. 26:1-11). When bringing their baskets of first fruits to the altar, the worshippers were to recite the story: “A wandering Aramean was my father . . . the Egyptians treated us harshly . . . the LORD brought us out of Egypt . . . he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now (not just because of this year’s crop, but on the basis of my whole story) I bring the first of the ground, which thou, O LORD, hast given me.” Note how the present moment is drawn up into and participates in the whole. The tradition thus keeps the present from being an isolated fragment of time and experience.

The Tradition Points to the Future

Even as the tradition binds past and present together, it also directs both to the future. The goal of the tradition is not to perpetuate the past, much less to idolize it. The goal is rather future-oriented. The tradition, properly rehearsed and appropriated, will enable each member of the community and therefore the community itself to step into the future with confidence and hope (cf. Hebrews 11).

It is instructive to note that both the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) in the Old Testament and Luke-Acts in the New Testament are each in a real sense unfinished histories. The former ends with the people of Israel in Exile, with their very existence as a people hanging in the balance. Acts ends with the apostle Paul awaiting trial in Rome, with the outcome of that trial and its implications for Paul and his apostolic career totally unknown. Various historical explanations have been

advanced to account for the unfinished nature of these two works. Theologically, however, it seems clear that each has the future in view, as uncertain and precarious as that future might be, and that each is written not to encapsulate the past but to enable the communities of faith to face their respective futures. Again, in the words of Lischer, the story “enlarges the hearer’s history by opening it to the future.”

Conclusions

There are inevitable dangers in passing on the tradition. One is the tendency to idolize the past in the strictest sense of that word. When this happens both present and future are made to serve the past (contrary to the fundamental purpose of traditioning), and worship services become, as it were, a reading of the tombstones in the cemetery. A closely-related danger is the assumption that a mere knowledge of the facts of the story is sufficient. Such is most certainly the case. As Hosea reminded his generation, true knowledge of God is found only in a faithful, covenant-keeping relationship with him.

Again, one can magnify a part of the story to the exclusion of the rest of it. Perhaps an even greater danger lies in confusing our understanding of the story at any given moment with the story itself. But the greatest danger of all would be in not telling the story in all its historical, ethical, and liturgical richness, in assuming that all know the story and need not hear it again and again. To fail to tradition the next generation,

and the next and the next, would be to cut them off from what it truly means to be the people of God.

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