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Making the Handoff*

Stan Reid

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed (NRSV).¹

In high school, I was known for my deceptive speed—I ran much slower than it looked. During track season, I ran distance races and not sprint events. However, I was fascinated with the timing required for the handoffs of the relay teams. Precise baton exchanges were critical. Precious seconds could be lost, or the baton dropped.

My sophomore year, our sprint relay team was holding first place at the district meet. On the last leg of the race, the baton was dropped. The team was disqualified. Hopes for a state title fell with the baton as it bounced on the track. The next year, our relay team spent more time practicing its handoffs than running sprints. The number of steps required for the runner

* Portions of this essay were part of a chapel homily first presented at Austin Graduate School of Theology on September 8, 2008. It was subsequently preached as a Sunday sermon before being adapted for publication.

¹ All scripture citations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

receiving the baton to reach full speed and remain within the handoff zone at the exchange were measured and marked on the track.

The importance of making handoffs was dramatically illustrated in the 2008 Summer Olympics. The USA men's and women's 4x100 meter relay teams entered the games as contenders for gold medals. However, on the last handoff of their preliminary heats, the men failed to make the exchange and the women dropped their baton. The importance of practicing the handoff cannot be exaggerated. The image of relay runners smoothly handing off the baton aptly fits Luke's prologue.

Luke's Intent to Hand on the Christian Tradition

The first four verses of the Gospel of Luke serve as a prologue and have been compared to the publicity blurbs written on the modern book jacket, its table of contents, and the title page.² This prologue indicates the care with which Luke, a second or third generation Christian, took up his pen in order to preserve and hand down the gospel.³ According to R. Allan Culpepper, "[E]very detail [of the prologue] creates the impression of an educated, informed writer who is concerned to provide his readers a lucid, informed, and reliable report of significant events."⁴

Luke's word in verse 2 is significant. *Paradidōmi* may be translated "deliver," "hand down," or "hand over." The word conveys the idea of giving over someone or something from one's hand to someone else. As a legal

² Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1995), 17. "For writers in antiquity, where the first column of writing, even the first sentence, performed much of the purpose of the modern book-jacket blurb, table of contents, and title page, a literary work's opening sentence is crucial for alerting those who either read it or heard it to what could be expected in the work as a whole."

³ The name of the author is not identified in the third gospel. However, the earliest traditions of the church identified Luke, the traveling companion of Paul in Acts, as the one who penned this work.

⁴ R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke" in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander Keck, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 41.

term it described a person being passed along in the judicial process (e.g., Mark 15:1; Acts 28:17). As a religious term, as in our passage, *paradidōmi* meant delivering authoritative decisions (cf. Acts 16:4), conveying tradition (1 Cor 11:2), or passing along teachings (1 Cor 15:3).

Luke knew the importance of handing off the gospel to a new generation.⁵ Although Luke does not use the word gospel⁶ in his prologue, surely he is referring to it when he straightforwardly tells Theophilus that he wants him to “know the truth concerning the things about which [he has] been instructed” (v. 4). “The events that have been fulfilled among us” (v. 1), in Luke’s eyes, are nothing other than the fulfillment of all God’s redemptive purposes for Israel.⁷

Surely part of Luke’s concern to write an orderly account is driven by his awareness that the gospel had been carried in all directions. Following the agenda for the church set out by its risen Lord in Acts 1:8, the gospel spread

⁵ Luke’s composition is dedicated to a certain Theophilus, whom he addresses as “most excellent,” perhaps indicating that he may have been a Roman official (cf. Acts 23:26, where Claudius Lysias addresses his letter to “his Excellency Governor Felix”). Some speculate that Theophilus was inquiring about Christianity or was possibly a Christian neophyte. If Theophilus was a Roman official, we could assume Luke is making a formal defense of the Christian faith. If he was an inquirer, we could think Luke is making a case for Theophilus to come to faith. If he was a new Christian, we could conclude that he needs assurance (*asphaleia*) about his faith decision. Various translations as “truth” (NRSV), “certainty (NIV, KJV) or “well founded” (NJB), *asphaleia* literally means being safe from falling; i.e., being secure or on a solid foundation. As a legal term, it denoted keeping a prisoner securely guarded. Figuratively, the word was used in reference to authentic instruction that was reliable and truthful. As such, it provided certainty, as in Paul’s statement to the Philippians, “To write to you what I have already written before is no trouble to me and to you will be a *protection*” (Phil 3:1 NRSV, NIV, emphasis added; “safeguard,” NJB).

⁶ In verse 1, Luke uses the word *diēgēsis* which referred to a discourse providing an orderly account of stories and events in the form of a narrative.

⁷ Throughout his gospel, Luke references this fulfillment motif (cf. 1:20; 4:21; 9:31; 24:44)

geographically across the Roman Empire. However, Luke must have known that the gospel was also being taken in all directions theologically.⁸

Oral delivery was the earliest and most prevalent form of spreading the gospel in the first century. Stories about Jesus were told by those who had witnessed his life, death, and resurrection and believed his claim to be Messiah and Lord. Others who heard and believed it would in turn pass the story on.

We should not be surprised that some who told the story passed it on incorrectly. I'm reminded of the old parlor game of "Gossip" or "Telephone," where one within a group writes down some statement. That person whispers the statement into another person's ear. The statement passes from person to person in the same manner. The last person receiving the message tells the entire group what he has heard. If the group is sufficiently large, the last word heard is oftentimes far removed from the original message. Oral narrative has liabilities and requires some means of evaluation for accuracy.⁹

Luke knew that the church of his generation needed an accurate account of the gospel. The church of Luke's time, in its second or third generation, faced the danger of an inaccurate dissemination of the gospel. It appears that garbled, muddled, and possibly misleading versions were arising.¹⁰ Luke knew the handoff was critical and the baton was in danger of being dropped.

⁸ E.g., we witness the attempt to add Jewish legal requirements early in the life of the church. (cf. Acts 15 and Galatians). This continues to be a threat later in the first century (cf. 1 Tim 1:3–7). Although Christian Gnosticism is not fully shaped until the second century, incipient forms of the heresy can be detected in Colossians. As another example, the doctrine of the resurrection likewise came under attack and had to be addressed (cf. 1 Cor 15 and 2 Tim 2:17–18).

⁹ In effect, this is exactly what Luke praised the Jews in Berea for. "These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

¹⁰ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: WJKP, 2004), 3.

He knew the church had a tremendous responsibility to pass on the gospel faithfully.

Learning from Luke's Methodology

Today we are not in the same position as those who first wrote the history of Jesus. However, some of us must join the ranks of those interpreting the meaning of that history for the church. The church does well to give attention to the prologue of Luke's gospel. Luke knew that he was not only a recipient of the gospel tradition, but also a steward of that tradition.

The noun form of the verb translated "handed on" (*paradidōmi*) in verse 1 is *paradōsis*.¹¹ In the New Testament, *paradōsis* is variously translated as teaching, instruction, or tradition. In the modern world, tradition is often disparaged. This perspective is partially based on the gospel accounts that depict Jesus in heated debate with Jewish authorities and his censure of their traditions. For example, the Pharisees and scribes criticized Jesus' disciples for breaking the traditions of the elders. Jesus replied, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ... You make void the word of God" (Matt 15:1-11). In Mark's account, Jesus says, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!" (Mark 7:1-16).

This wholly negative view is unfortunate since tradition is also held in a positive light elsewhere in the New Testament, in reference to the Christian faith being passed on to another person, group or generation. For example, Paul and Silas went from church to church and "delivered (*paradidōmi*; i.e., "handed on") to them the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and

¹¹ In Classical Greek, the word was used in the theater in reference to an actor/poet on the stage "speaking from above" the audience. He was "handing down" the message. The word was also used in Greek religion to describe "the delivery of holy tradition." The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) used the word for "that which is handed down."

elders who were in Jerusalem” (Acts 16:4). In other words, a decision made by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15) carried apostolic authority and was “handed on” (the verb form of the word for *tradition*) to the churches who were expected to accept and follow their decisions.

Paul also stressed tradition when he addressed the practice of the Lord’s Supper and referenced the basic content of Christian proclamation (1 Cor 11:2 and 15:3). A similar outlook is expressed in 2 Thessalonians 2:15: “So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the *traditions* that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.” Another relevant passage is Jude 3: “I find it necessary to write an appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted [*paradidōmi*; i.e., “handed on”] to the saints.” This verse regrettably is used by some to justify contentious attitudes and legalistic interpretations of the faith. However, it is to our detriment if we take these to justify a contemptuous attitude toward tradition. Pelikan’s distinction between *traditionalism* as “the dead faith of the living” and *tradition* as “the living faith of the dead is helpful.”¹² A church that neglects to hand on the gospel tradition is limiting, if not harming, its future.

Looking back over twenty centuries of church history, we can see why Luke was concerned about passing on the Christian tradition from generation to generation. Faithfully *living* the Christian story requires *knowing* the tradition. In other words, content inherently shapes conduct and practice.

Church history is filled with stories of botched handoffs of the faith and the tragic consequences. Yet, God is faithful to the gospel and gracious to the church. Therefore, church history is also full of accounts of corrections made and reforms led by later generations. However, generations who fail to

¹² Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)*, vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition: The Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 9.

receive the tradition—for whatever reasons—inevitably suffer consequences.¹³ A botched handoff by one generation can adversely affect the future, with ensuing generations failing to grasp and experience the blessings of the faith.

Recognizing Our Vulnerability

Like the church of Luke's day, the contemporary church also risks going in all directions theologically. We find evidence of this when listening to Christian radio, watching televangelists, viewing documentaries or dramas regarding Christianity, or browsing the Religion section of bookstores. This is not to suggest that no value can be found in these venues. However, careful listeners, astute viewers, and thoughtful readers will recognize confused claims about Christianity. Those less informed are vulnerable to ideas that at best will not strengthen their faith and at worst could wreck it.

There is a growing fascination with anything mysterious or unorthodox in Western society. The Christianity section of most major bookstore chains teem with volumes sympathetic to the Gnostic gospels, which the ancient church rejected as heresy. Yet neo-Gnosticism is gaining new audiences and promoted by some as the true representation of Christianity. Also, volumes about spiritual warfare and the end times have become popular. Many of these are based on questionable interpretation and dubious theological assumptions. Too often Christians, as well as the general public, uncritically

¹³ The challenge of passing the faith from generation to generation is deeply rooted in the biblical story as well. Succeeding generations of Israelites struggled with remaining faithful to their covenant calling and identity. "While the failure of a specific generation to seek its identity in the covenant did not shake God's purposes, it did have an impact on that generation. ... When a generation failed to live for [God], it suffered the loss of blessings and a deterioration of life. But when it affirmed its identity as [God's] people and lived in responsive obedience, God graciously permitted it to experience in space and time the blessings promised for eternity." See Lawrence O. Richards and Gibb Martin, *A Theology of Personal Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 16.

accept the doctrines presented. Dan Brown's best-seller *The Da Vinci Code* revived a medieval tale of Jesus fathering a child with Mary Magdalene. Many accepted this fiction as historical fact. Although Brown's revisionist history has been thoroughly refuted, the uninformed are vulnerable to his fanciful narrative.¹⁴

Beyond its vulnerability to competing worldviews, the church is also threatened by uncritical tolerance. The modern obsession with tolerance is an understandable reaction to bigotry, ignorance, and the growing militancy of religious fanaticism of all stripes.

However, we should not forget that showing respect for persons holding different beliefs and practices can be done without consenting to those beliefs and practices. Alexander Campbell is reputed to have conducted his debates in this spirit.¹⁵ Regrettably, not everyone in the Stone-Campbell tradition has upheld this irenic spirit in debate. Much has been done to correct judgmental and mean-spirited interchanges inside and outside the church. However, the proverbial pendulum has swung in the other direction. Are we in danger of forgetting that there is an appropriate time for respectful disagreement about matters of faith and practice? If so, we are vulnerable to the relativistic implications of uncritical tolerance of all beliefs and practices.

Young Christians pursuing college educations are particularly vulnerable. A Christian friend, a bright and thoughtful college student, recently

¹⁴ My wife witnessed this when a co-worker who had been baptized as a child, attends church infrequently, but considers herself a Christian readily embraced Brown's viewpoint.

¹⁵ Commenting on Campbell's 1837 debate with Bishop Purcell of the Roman Catholic Church, Leroy Garret states, "But whatever merits the debate had otherwise, the disputants came out of it with a high opinion of one another. While Campbell viewed Purcell as a gentleman and as one of the fairest men he had debated, Purcell described Campbell as 'a most lovable character who treated me in every way and on all occasions like a brother.'" *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1981), 348.

spent a semester studying in Europe. There he encountered the postmodern viewpoint that history is written by the winners and that the losers, more often than not, actually held the truth which was suppressed. He returned from Europe asking questions about the formation of the Christian canon and the dependability of the Bible. Who will make the handoff to students like him?

Making the Handoff Today

In his essay, “Gone the Way of the Street-corner Preacher,” Paul Williams challenges the leadership of the church to get serious about studying theology. He recalls wandering the halls of a Midwestern church. In a large classroom, he noticed five people huddled in a corner. Near the door was a sign—“Great Themes in Theology.” The next classroom was as full as the other was empty. The sign by the door announced—“Summer Mission Trip to Southeast Asia.” Williams mused, “What if the group has a great time on their mission trip, but ultimately has nothing to say?”¹⁶ It is a crucial question for all of us to ask.

From its inception, the church entrusted ministers of the word with the task of handing on its faith. As one of these, Luke’s goal was to lead his audience to certainty regarding the truth of the Christian story. This must arise from careful investigation of the gospel narrative, which he then set down in an orderly account making it accessible to the Christian and inquirer alike. As Wallace Alston has memorably said, “Every meeting between min-

¹⁶ Paul S. Williams, “Gone the Way of the Street-corner Preacher,” *Christian Standard*, <http://www.christianstandard.com/andsoitgoes.asp?id=667>, (accessed July 20, 2009). According to Williams, “The church of the Enlightenment went to seed on theology. Christian maturity was sometimes wrongly equated with theological understanding. But as is always the case with those frustrating pendulums, we have swung to the other extreme. ... Change will occur only if the leadership of the church gets serious about studying theology again. Until the senior minister and the elders start considering open theism, the sacraments, the nature of truth, and a plethora of other critical subjects, the rest of the church cannot be expected to follow.” I’m indebted to Chris Frizzell for alerting me to this essay.

ister and people is a pastoral occasion, and every pastoral occasion a theological opportunity.”¹⁷ Luke’s pastoral occasion led to careful theological interpretation based on the historic Christian faith. The church depends on and is nurtured by those who pursue the necessary training to fulfill this ministry on its behalf.¹⁸

The last time I visited with my mother before her death, she spoke with me about the old oak dining table that my father’s aunt had passed on to our family. The table is over 100 years old. Along with the food shared there with my parents and brother, I also remember the parental instruction that graced the table, including conversations that shaped my faith.

I vividly recall the day I came home from grade school and proudly displayed my expanding vocabulary at the old oak table. Unfortunately, the words I used had been learned on the playground at recess and not in the classroom. My parents gasped, my brother laughed, and I was promptly corrected and instructed that we did not use such words in our family.

In our last conversation, my mother sought assurance that one of my daughters would want the old oak table and in turn pass it on to future generations. The furniture was only the tangible part of what she wished to pass on. Her main concern was that my daughters would value the family heritage

¹⁷ Wallace M. Alston, Jr., “The Ministry of Christian Theology,” in *Theology in the Service of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 25.

¹⁸ Pelikan notes that from “the years 100–600 most theologians were bishops; from 600–1500 in the West, they were monks; since 1500, they have been university professors. Gregory I, who died in 604, was a bishop who had been a monk; Martin Luther, who died in 1546, was a monk who became a university professor. Each of these life styles has left its mark on the job description of the theologian, but also on the way doctrine has continued to develop back and forth between believing, teaching, and confessing” (5). As one who has ministered in the church for nearly 30 years, I have faced many pastoral occasions. I am indebted to biblical scholars and theologians who, like Luke, taught and wrote for the faith of the church. Their dedicated efforts helped me think through the theological implications of pastoral occasions.

symbolized by the furniture. She and Dad were concerned not only to pass on a family heirloom to future generations, but the family tradition which had been shaped at that table including Christian instruction. This memory reminds me that Christians, especially Christian leaders, are responsible to follow Luke's lead and pass on the precious gift of faith to future generations.

Conclusion

Like runners on a relay team, care and deliberation are required if the church is to faithfully pass on its tradition. It is crucial that we get it right. In this essay, we've noted that tradition is viewed in both a positive and negative light in the New Testament. Unfortunately, in some quarters today, anti-tradition sentiments are prevalent. Pelikan's memorable distinction is helpful here: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead and traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." In Luke 1:1-4, a second-generation Christian offers us an example of the church passing on the knowledge, understanding and practice of the faith.

We face these questions and dilemmas daily. These pastoral occasions are theological opportunities for handing on the faith. We have the responsibility to secure our grip on what has been passed to us and ensure that we are in position to hand it off to those who will come after us.

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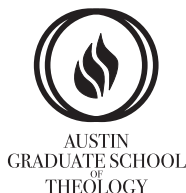
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