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Scripture and Tradition: Two Essentials in the Search for the Ancient Order

Allan J. McNicol

What happens when principled individuals, believing that the church will be corrupted if alternative views hold sway, come to fundamental disagreements over the interpretation of the text? Is there any other option but to divide when appeals to the Bible alone fail? This problem is not entirely new in the history of Christianity--especially since the Reformation. Frequently in the past an appeal has been made to tradition (i.e., teachings, customs, and practices) in those areas of the church's life that have developed independent of being guided directly by the explicit words of Scripture.¹

The tradition is more than just a vague remembrance of a way of "doing things," or even a network of supportive structures that exist to maintain and perpetuate a fellowship. Tradition has proved to be indispensable for the existence and development of the Christian movement. Such essentials as the sequence and number of the books of the Bible, many liturgical gestures and practices in the observance of baptism and the Lord's Supper, certain ways of interpreting Scripture, and the formulations of such important doctrines as the atonement, we owe to tradition.

Yet the precise relationship between Scripture and tradition is very difficult to define. This relationship between Scripture and tradition has been compared to the relationship between some married couples who have difficulty living together happily but who cannot exist apart.² Are there resources in tradition to which

¹R. P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (London: SCM, 62) 7-8.

²Maurice Wiles, "The Patristic Appeal to Tradition," *Explorations in Theology* 4 (London: SCM, 1979) 45.

we can appeal when we cannot agree that something is clearly warranted or excluded by Scripture? Can tradition help us at this point?

Challenges to Tradition

The very formulation of these questions may cause many in Churches of Christ to be puzzled. For the Campbell-Stone movement, which emerged at the end of the Enlightenment era, inherited some definite ideas about tradition.

If there was one thing that was clear to the spiritual forebears of the Campbells in the Reformed Churches, it was an emphasis on the authority of Scripture, *sola scriptura*, as the only norm for the basic doctrines of the church. Traditions were the corruptions of the medieval Church. They were the modern analogue to Jesus' charges against the scribes and Pharisees for circumventing God's essential demands by their own customs and rulings (Matt. 15:6-9).

Furthermore the Enlightenment itself, in reaction to the tyranny of past traditions in politics and religion, put a premium on the power of autonomous reason as the universal standard to criticize the past. Thus, the Campbell-Stone movement placed great emphasis on the capacity of the individual fully to make his or her own judgment about the truth of the faith.

This mixture of *sola scriptura* as interpreted by each individual *apart from* the traditions of the past had been part of the Protestant heritage from the sixteenth century.³ It was intensified by the Enlightenment, and it became an essential part of the identity of the Churches of Christ. In this context appeals to tradition were highly dubious if not out of the question.

Nevertheless, the strong emphasis on *sola scriptura* in conjunction with an appeal to the absolute right of the individual to his private judgment has produced endless divisions both in the Reformed and Campbell-Stone heritages. We have discovered in

³Ralph G. Wilburn, "The Role of Tradition in the Church's Experience of Jesus as Christ," *The Reconstruction of Theology 2*, ed., R. G. Wilburn (St. Louis: Bethany, 1962) 116.

many areas that Scripture does not unmistakably bear its meaning upon the surface.⁴ There are limits to the principle of the perspicuity of Scripture. Without a community sharing a certain vision of the past and a common concept of how things ought to be (tradition) it is hard to see how in our contemporary world a faith community will hold together. Certainly not just on the principle of *sola scriptura*!

A complicating factor in the maintenance of a viable Christian community today is that any appeal to the past as normative (Scripture or tradition) has become problematic in twentieth-century Western culture. The Enlightenment program of using autonomous human reason to discover an all-encompassing rational order to the world has collapsed as the dominant cultural model in the West. There is no universal basis by which we can establish the superiority of one mode of thinking in our culture over any other. Although we may not be doomed to total relativism most things are viewed as relative.⁵ This explains why many wonder why we should look to the past for guidance at all. If we did, how could we be sure that what we found there would be permanent and true?

No longer can the Christian movement assimilate with the best of the past and expect to find ready acceptance in the West. Just as for long stretches of human history one could assume that something was true because Plato was alleged to have said it,⁶ so for centuries, Christianity considered something as true if it could be found in the Bible or early tradition. Today, Christians face a society that seeks to discover its possibilities not from the past but on the basis of what it perceives to be the future.⁷ Many, even

⁴Wiles, 44.

⁵F. W. Norris, "Apostolic, Catholic, and Sensible: The Consensus Fidelium," *Essays on New Testament Christianity*, ed., C. Robert Wetzel (Cincinnati: Standard, 1978) 27.

⁶Wiles, 50.

⁷R. Bauckham, "Tradition in Relation to Scripture and Reason," *Scripture Tradition and Reason: A Study in the Criteria of Christian Doctrine*, eds., R. Bauckham and B. Drewery (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1988) 134-139. As Bauckham notes

within the church, in such areas as the role of women, sexual mores, and our relationship to nature, claim to find the basis for their views not in resources drawn from the past but in future possibility.

However, we have just noted that no particular era is privileged, including the modern secular period. In our society various communities maintain strong continuity with the past. Despite changes and permutations, the Churches of Christ continue to maintain a sense of identity as a continuing tradition. Jaroslav Pelikan has registered,

Tradition is the living faith of the dead;
traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.⁸

We trust, in our case, the former is true. If so, we will continue to look to the past to find resources looking both to our own heritage and beyond to the Scripture and ancient tradition to enable us to engage creatively the challenges that emerge in our own time. In order to do this we must have an appropriate understanding of what are the resources that we can draw from the past, and this includes a defensible understanding of the function of Scripture and tradition for the life of the church.

In this essay we wish to address what we have identified as a basic problem of the Campbell-Stone heritage. How can we remain in unity, even when we disagree on particulars in reading

saliently, in our modern pluralistic society, with its basic assumption that all serious discourse must be cast in a secular mode, a case can be made that Christians are not so much another variant form of pluralism, but an anachronistic survival of something much earlier. Many (including this author) today celebrate our minority status in the West and declare solidarity with the Pre-Constantinian period of the Church. But Bauckham rightly reminds us that there is a major difference. The people of Rome in the earlier period venerated the past and found its models and norms in antiquity. Christianity could easily capitalize on this propensity by appealing to its own sacred events in the past. The modern secular era does not. How will this affect a modern apologetic?

⁸Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale, 1984) 65.

the Bible?⁹ Already we have intimated that this problem cannot be solved until we draw on the resources of both Scripture and tradition. The goal of this essay is to give a coherent explanation of the role of these entities, especially for the life of Churches of Christ.

Our basic argument will be that Scripture is normative for the church because it is the codification of the apostolic witness to the life and impact of Jesus Christ. Tradition functions in historic Christianity as a depository of the common mind as to interpretation of Scripture and practice of the Christian faith to which later Christians may appeal.

First, we will examine and briefly criticize three ways Scripture and tradition have historically been related. Second, we will set forth our own assessment of how an adequate relationship between Scripture and tradition was forged in the second century and how this may serve as a model for the church today. Third, we will argue that this proposal is more adequate than earlier models of Scripture and tradition. We will conclude by noting how this proposal can help Churches of Christ maintain unity as a fellowship even though we may not all agree on exactly what the Bible says.

Paradoxically, as a fellowship which has severely criticized tradition, Churches of Christ depend heavily on tradition. At least most historic Protestant communities are bound together confessionally through acceptance of the creeds of the patristic era and certain post-Reformation confessions. As a non-creedal communion, without a clear understanding of being a theological tradition, it is difficult to see what, besides customs and practices (tradition), holds Churches of Christ together.

⁹We presume that the old formula, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity," is outmoded because it begs many important questions, such as the determination of what is essential and what is non-essential.

Three Visions of Tradition¹⁰

The Coincidence View

A prominent view of tradition holding from the time of Irenaeus (circa 175-200 A.D.) until the mid-fifth century was the coincidence view. This view makes no distinction between the Scriptures and the oral presentation and transmission, in custom and practice, of the apostolic message. Materially, the two are locked together as a total statement of the way of salvation.¹¹

For Irenaeus and his successors there was a second important coincidence. The teachings of the bishops in those churches founded by the apostles coincided with the teaching of the apostles. Thus the bishops were, effectively, the true keepers and interpreters of the apostolic message.

The view that the truth of the faith coincides and corresponds with the teaching of a continuing line of bishops has had great appeal throughout Christian history. However, it is plagued with serious historical and theological inconsistencies. Already with the banishment of the Jews from Jerusalem by Hadrian in 135 A.D., the Jerusalem church had to be refounded under Gentile leadership. Similar historical disruptions have taken place in all churches founded by the apostles. Major theological changes wherein past beliefs were repudiated have been even more frequent.

Such a view also identifies the work of the Holy Spirit too closely with the emergence of a certain kind of leadership and decisions in certain restricted councils. How can we be sure that these men always spoke the truth and that the patristic proclamations coincided with the apostolic message? And since there are at least three competing groups who claim to be the legitimate heirs

¹⁰The terminology for these views comes from the influential article of A. N. S. Lane, "Scripture, Tradition and Church: An Historical Survey," *Vox Evangelica* 9 (1975) 37-55.

¹¹Bauckham, 119.

of this tradition (Rome, Canterbury, Eastern Orthodoxy) which is the one that is most loyal to apostolic teaching?

The Supplementary View

This view has had major currency in Western Christianity (especially the Roman Catholic Church) since the fourth century. The essence of this view is that Christians owe equal allegiance both to the New Testament and to the constant developing body of tradition that emerged in the church. Scripture and tradition were two distinct sources of revelation.¹² As a logical extension of the coincidence view, by the high Middle Ages, some claimed that the teaching office of the church (magisterium), through the instrumentalities of tradition and Spirit, was empowered to interpret and supplement the revelation of God in Scripture. Since the Council of Trent (1545-1563), and especially since Newman (1845-1890), tradition, in these circles, was viewed as an unfolding in various and distinct forms of what was implicit in the original revelation. In effect, this has allowed for ideas such as the perpetual virginity of Mary and her bodily assumption into heaven to become church dogma. In order to determine how later changing doctrine is true to implicit ideas in Scripture, the magisterium took on stronger powers and basic pronouncements of the bishop of Rome were declared infallible.

A critique similar to that which was made of the coincidence view may also apply to the supplementary view. Setting aside issues concerning the personal conduct of church leaders in history, it is questionable that the hierarchical structure of later Catholicism is a valid continuation of the servant ministry of Christ and the apostles. When does doctrinal development cease and perversion begin?

¹²H. A. Obermann, 'Quo Vadis? Tradition from Irenaeus to Humani Genesis,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16 (1963) 232-247.

The Ancillary View

Following the Reformation, a new perspective on Scripture was set forth in Western Christianity. The Reformers believed that the church had become corrupt. They could no longer believe the claims made on the basis of tradition by the medieval Church. Many human corruptions and flaws had become intermingled with the tradition. It needed to be purged.

The Reformers found their basic standards for assessing what was normative in *sola scriptura*. The Scripture was deemed both formally and materially sufficient to give guidance for the contemporary faith community. In its essence, all of tradition must be ancillary to the norm of Scripture. Tradition was just a tool to help the church understand Scripture.¹³

The tragedy of the Reformation was that interpreters could not find in Scripture clear answers to their doctrinal problems. Since authoritative tradition had been eclipsed, a crisis of authority arose. The result was that new confessions and creeds emerged in post-Reformation Christianity both to serve as vantage points for privileged interpretations of the text and to supply a rationale for the existence of separate fellowships.¹⁴

It is one thing to claim that Scripture is sufficient as the norm for the pure doctrine of the church. It is quite another thing to have a multitude of versions of that pure doctrine--all with adherents who claim they will not associate with others not holding the same point of view. To be honest, this was a central legacy of the Reformation. The children of the Campbell-Stone movement continue to have to deal with this situation.

Thus, the long history of the church bequeaths to us the dilemma of tradition. Are we to give ourselves over to a view that places Scripture and tradition on the same level but demands a teaching office (which history reveals is flawed) to mediate to us the

¹³Bauckham, 122-123; Lane, 43.

¹⁴Albert Outler, *The Christian Tradition and the Unity We Seek* (New York: Oxford, 1957) 91.

truth? Or do we go back to an infallible book which history reveals cannot be fully agreed upon? The choice is difficult. Is there an alternative to these ways of construing Scripture and tradition?

As a way of looking for alternatives we will now study how this issue was originally formulated in the ancient church.

Scripture and Tradition in the Ancient Church

From its beginning, the story of the events which took place in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, and the impact they made on the circle of followers around him, could be thought of as inaugurating a tradition. This tradition included the basic facts of the gospel (1 Cor. 15:3-5), words of Jesus (1 Thess. 4:15; 1 Cor. 7:10; 9-14; 11:23-25), and rules concerning conduct and practice that were appropriate for the faith (2 Thess. 3:6; 1 Cor. 11:2; Rom. 6:17; Phil. 1:9; 2:6-7).¹⁵ Thus the proclamation of the gospel was much more than just the recitation of a few basic facts.

When Paul preached, he gave enough information about Jesus' life and mission that people could grasp intelligibly the claim that he was the fulfillment of traditional hopes for a sacrificial leader of the new Israel (the Christ who died for their sins) and that as a result of Jesus' life their lives could be transformed.

In the Gospel of John the net is spread even wider. Jesus could only be appropriately received when he was understood as the eternal Word of God, who became flesh, and in his concrete life made known the will of God. Other biblical writers (Matthew, Luke, author of Hebrews) assume similar frameworks for understanding the gospel.

Thus, from the beginning, the gospel was part of a process of tradition; it offered a peculiar way of looking at the world that invoked in the lives of the hearers both a new insight into reality and a transformation of their existence.

¹⁵F. F. Bruce, "Scripture and Tradition in the New Testament," *Holy Book and Holy Tradition*, eds., F. F. Bruce and E. G. Rupp (Manchester: Manchester University, 1968) 68-69.

About 200 A.D. most of the apostolic writings, as a collection, came to be called the New Testament. But even if they were the expression, par excellence, of the apostolic tradition, this did not mean that the continuance of additional living tradition was vitiated by their acceptance.

Papias (125-140) referred to this tradition as "a living and abiding voice." In the late second and third centuries such writers as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus attempted to formulate this tradition into extensive summaries that often went by the Latin title *regula fidei* (rule of faith).¹⁶ These summaries were thought to constitute the essential core of the tradition.

Nevertheless, there was a basic development in the understanding of tradition in the second century that was to prove to be a matter of fundamental significance for the history of the church. It pertains to the fact that the written apostolic legacy soon took on a life of its own.

In the first half of the second century the letters of Paul and the four Gospels were put into collections and began to be read in churches as the sequel to readings from the Law and the Prophets. Increasingly, as a result of their hallowed use in worship and as a basis for teaching, these writings were given a certain theological priority. Thus, by the end of the second century, the heritage of the apostles was found not in one entity but two: Scripture and tradition.

The issue now became that of the appropriate relationship between these two distinct entities. In matters of practice, which is normative and on what basis does one appeal to each of these distinct entities?

The Gnostic Issue

The Gnostic question brought these issues to the surface. At stake here were not only matters of antiquarian interest. Because

¹⁶Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1:2; 3:4:1; 4:53:1; Tertullian, *Basic Objections [Praescriptio] Against Heretics* 13:1-6; Hippolytus, *Against Noetues* 17-18; cf. Hanson, 75-130 for translations of the texts and a full discussion.

of the way the issues were formed, precedents were set that would affect theological discussion for all time.

At the heart of the controversy were the claims of some Gnostic leaders in the church that they had received divine revelation esoterically from certain chains of witnesses who went back to such close associates of the risen Christ as Thomas (whom some claimed to be Jesus' twin brother), James, another brother of Jesus, and even Mary Magdalene. As recipients of the word of the risen Lord, the Gnostic leaders were convinced that they had a firm and unshakable warrant for their beliefs.

Of course, on the other hand, the mainstream of the church was just as convinced that Christianity stood or fell on the belief that the flesh-and-blood Son of God died on the cross for our sins and was raised bodily from the dead. Which teachers were correct? To what authority could one appeal to settle this issue?

To appeal to tradition was unsatisfactory. Both groups had very different understandings of its form, content, and process. Although they agreed that ultimately their traditions came from the same source, all they could do was to compare the merits of these different perspectives.

It was not entirely satisfactory to appeal directly to the Scriptures. The Gnostics said that they did accept the New Testament writings (especially John) as apostolic. They sought authoritative guidance from Scripture; they just read it differently. Both parties soon discovered that they were perfectly capable of finding their own particular agendas in the text. Thus the appeal to tradition alone, or Scripture alone, faltered as the basic norm for the church.

The response of the majority of believers was to adopt a version of the importance of *both* Scripture and tradition. Their crucial move, as opposed to the Gnostics, who placed great emphasis on the secret transmission of the mysteries of the faith, was an appeal to the public and open nature of the appearance of the Son of God and a similar open transmission of the tradition about him.¹⁷ The word was made flesh and appeared visibly

¹⁷Wiles, 45.

among us for all to see. The list of bishops who taught openly in the various churches founded by the apostles was something potentially all could investigate. The rule of faith was arrived at through open reading and study by leaders and prominent interpreters in the church.

The Common Mind

Here is a clue to understanding the relationship of Scripture and tradition in a manner helpful for us today. As with the second-century church, we would affirm that the New Testament constitutes the basic codification of the apostolic message. Cullmann is correct when he argues that the second-century church, *by its very action* of placing these writings in a *collection* for use in worship and teaching, established the principle that all subsequent developments of the tradition must be submitted to the control of Scripture.¹⁸ There *is* a qualitative difference between the message of the apostles and the teaching of the bishops.

Yet, Scripture is of little help unless it can be normatively interpreted. Here the principle that the authoritative message of Scripture is found through an appeal to the common mind of the church, arrived at through open and public discussion among a broad spectrum of respected leaders and interpreters, is crucial. This principle excluded the Gnostics. It also placed Scripture and tradition in proper perspective. Scripture was the codification of the apostolic message. Tradition was that body of practices and interpretation of Scripture, informed by the rule of faith (itself drawn from Scripture), that served as the basic depository of the common mind of the church as to how it should understand the apostolic witness.

To be sure, the intent of Irenaeus and his successors to go farther and create an unbroken line of bishops as the guarantor of the common mind of the church was a colossal mistake. Even in

¹⁸Oscar Cullmann, "The Tradition," *The Early Church: Studies in Early Christian History and Theology*, ed., A. J. B. Higgins (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956) 90.

his day it was a historical fiction that strained credibility. It is an impossible position for any modern person who has studied history critically.¹⁹ One of its tragic legacies was that it marked a fundamental step along the way toward the dominance of the bishop of Rome.

But, as Wiles points out, although Irenaeus was wrong materially in framing his lists of bishops, formally, his appeal to the understanding of tradition as the common mind of the church was basically sound.²⁰

Scripture, Tradition, and the Churches of Christ

Unfortunately, the promising model of Scripture and tradition that emerged at the end of the second century was replaced by others in the successive centuries of the history of the church. However, the appeal to the common mind of the church, as a model for tradition, is both superior to the other prominent models and is compatible with theological argumentation frequently carried on within Churches of Christ.

The Appeal to the Common Mind of the Church and Later Models of Tradition

The common-mind view is very different from the supplementary view. The former takes the position that it was the decision of the church to subordinate itself to Scripture as the only normative account of God's revelation in history. It thus continues to stress that the time and events of salvation history have absolute priority. The latter argues either flatly that revelation can be supplemented by tradition or equivocally claims that Scripture and tradition are two sources of revelation. In either case the finality

¹⁹A. J. McNicol, "A Hierarchy or Mere Functional Leadership," *ICS Faculty Bulletin* 7 (1986) 40-47 traces the dubious arguments made on behalf of this position in the Western medieval Church.

²⁰Wiles, 46.

of the time and account of salvation history in Scripture is compromised.

With respect to the ancillary view, the principle of *sola scriptura* makes it very attractive. Likewise, the view that tradition is a tool that helps us interpret Scripture is plausible. Nevertheless, as it has worked out in practice, the ancillary view has opened a Pandora's box of private interpretations of Scripture, which, in turn have legitimized a plethora of distortions and sectarian divisions within historic Christianity. That is its fundamental flaw. Conversely, the appeal to the common mind of the church calls for more intensity in ecumenical endeavor and, in principle, curbs the emphasis that has been placed in some circles on eccentric and privileged interpretations.

The common-mind-of-the-church position both materially and formally comes close to the coincidence view of tradition. Indeed the slogan of the fifth-century leader, Vincentius of Lerinum, "what was believed everywhere, always, by everyone," although a classical statement of the coincidence view, sounds very much like the common-mind position. But, as we have noted, appeals like those of Vincent were not to the common mind of great interpreters and consecrated leaders but to lists of bishops and decisions of certain councils, who took it upon themselves to define the material content of the tradition. Our model appeals to the common mind of the church catholic, not to one or another of the various traditions which claim infallibility. The total sum of all wisdom does not rest in one segment of the patristic church any more than it does in the modern church.

The Common Mind of the Church and Churches of Christ

As a movement that sought to proclaim the gospel in its total purity and to restore the ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper) to their appropriate role as places where the divine benefits are mediated, the Campbell-Stone heritage has a major stake in a view of tradition that appeals to the common mind of the church. Indeed, if this movement is ever to become anything more than

just another footnote in the history of sectarianism it had better take note of how its best interpreters have incorporated this vision of tradition into their exegesis.

Thus, when Alexander Campbell set out to defend the practice of believer's baptism for the remission of sins, he repeatedly sought to justify the various aspects of the procedure and meaning of baptism by making appeals, not only to Scripture, but also to the works of prominent teachers of the church throughout history.²¹

Many other examples of this argumentation could be given. A pertinent modern example is the work of Everett Ferguson who seeks to make the case for *a cappella* music in the church on the grounds that vocal singing has been universally approved as the acceptable form of music for Christian worship.²² Ferguson makes a lengthy appeal to the common mind of the great teachers of the church universal in support of this position.²³

In an important article that comes out of the Campbell-Stone movement, Frederick Norris states:

If our movement actually is not concerned with Scripture as the apostolic witness to the creative period of Christianity, if it does not search for the catholic interpretation of Scripture offered by qualified interpreters of each age, . . . then I must go elsewhere.²⁴

²¹A. Campbell, *Christian Baptism with its Antecedents and Consequents* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company 1951 reprint; original edition N. D.). Note especially pp. 209-210 where he gives lengthy quotes on the purpose of baptism from Luther and Calvin, cf. F. D. Kershner, *The Christian Union Overture: An Interpretation of the Declaration and Address of Thomas Campbell* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1923) 44-45, who traces the appeal to a common mind to Thomas Campbell.

²²E. Ferguson, *A Cappella Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, revised edition (Abilene, TX: Biblical Research, 1972).

²³Ferguson, 47-83.

²⁴Norris, 27.

We concur with his point. Without an understanding of Scripture as the codification of the apostolic witness, and a view of tradition as the depository of the common mind of the church in matters of practice and interpretation of Scripture, Churches of Christ will be doomed to a legacy of continued fragmentation.

Conclusion

The focus of this essay has been an analysis of the role of tradition in the historic Christian faith. We have noted not only past controversies, but have also endeavored to call to attention the challenge of many in the modern era who seek to invalidate any appeal to the past as normative.

As a restorationist fellowship, the Churches of Christ have a considerable stake in developing a coherent view of tradition. We must appeal to the past as setting the basic patterns and precedents for our faith. But some ways are more effective than others. Churches of Christ should be more conversant with the different approaches in Christian history toward tradition. There is a need to reclaim that view of tradition which is most congruent with our fellowship: the appeal to the common mind of the church. It will only be after careful and consistent application of this principle that we will have any chance of stopping the movement towards fragmentation besetting Churches of Christ. We trust that this essay will make a small contribution in the direction of clearer thinking on these matters.



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