Christian Studies

A Publication of the Faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology

Volume 21 / 2005–2006

Christian Studies (ISSN 1050–4125) is a publication of the faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology (formerly the Institute for Christian Studies). *Christian Studies* is funded by gifts from readers and friends of the graduate school. Subscription is free upon request. Back issues are available for $3.00 each, plus postage. Address correspondence to Michael R. Weed, Editor, *Christian Studies*, Austin Graduate School of Theology, 1909 University Avenue, Austin, Texas 78705. *Christian Studies* is indexed in *Religion Index One*. FAX: (512) 476–3919. Web Site: www.austingrad.edu. E-mail: christianstudiespress@austingrad.edu.

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Volume 21 Fall 2006

Foreword

American political discussions are commonly criticized as lacking substance and failing to engage issues, often containing little more than sound bites. The same could be said of many discussions being carried on among American churches. If clarity and substance are important for political discussions, how much more is this true for discussions of our faith?

Fifty years ago, Jacques Barzun introduced the term "thought clichés"—widely used phrases that foster the impression of insight while becoming substitutes for clear thinking. Barzun cautioned that discussions based on thought clichés blur our vision and weaken our ability to understand complex matters. For our culture and our churches, the present is a time for clear thinking. Current discussions designating various beliefs or practices as not being "salvation issues" remind one of Barzun's thought clichés. However unintentionally, "salvation issues" gives the impression that there are lists of such issues directly applicable to churches and to individual believers. Such phrases predispose us to minimalist approaches to Christian faith and life. They invite the question, "What are the minimal beliefs and practices required for recognizing a person or community as 'Christian'?"

This is not unlike asking the requirements for persons to be legally married. A very different question is, "What are the commitments, conditions, and practices that sustain lasting and healthy marriages and families?" Identifying minimal beliefs and practices required to designate a person or community as "Christian" is not the same as identifying beliefs, commitments, practices—even traditions—necessary to sustain faithful lives and churches over generations. Failing to make this distinction may do lasting harm. *Christian Studies* is published to encourage reflection on the beliefs, commitments, and practices that sustain faithful churches.

Special thanks are owed to guest contributors, longtime friends of Austin Graduate School of Theology, Drs. Everett Ferguson, Leroy Garrett, and J. J. M. Roberts; all have made lasting contributions to the church's ongoing conversation for many years.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

Tradition: A Stranger to the Modern World and Church

Michael R. Weed

> [W]e find within the operating domain of Christian tradition the joint imperatives of preservation and renewal. The former requires that the tradition be immune to the attrition of time, whereas the latter declares that its use is subject to abuse and corruption as well as recovery and correction.
>
> D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition*

> Those who are liberated from tradition generally become slaves to fashion.
>
> Basil Mitchell, *How to Play Theological Ping Pong*

Paradosis/Tradition in the New Testament

In its New Testament usage, tradition (Greek: *paradosis*) commonly designates an authoritative body of teachings, often including customs and practices, which a given group receives from its past, consciously follows, and passes on to future members of the community.[1] An incident frequently referenced by Christians to minimize, dismiss, or even discredit the importance

[1]See Oscar Cullman's "The Tradition: The Exegetical, Historical and Theological Problem," *The Early Church* (London: SCM, 1956), 55–99. See also Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) and "Tradition in Contemporary Life: A Symposium," *Modern Age* 36 (Spring 1994).

Austin Graduate School of Theology
CHRISTIAN STUDIES
Number 21 2005/2006 ©

of tradition is Jesus' familiar indictment of the Pharisees: "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition (*paradosin*)?" (Matt 15:3; cf. Mk 7:8–9). This text, however, is hardly grounds for dismissing all tradition. Jesus criticizes the Pharisees and scribes for allowing their tradition to circumvent the clear commandments of God. The issue is not tradition *per se*, but the nature of particular traditions.[2]

The apostle Paul uses the identical word to refer to the message received and handed on by him to his churches as "tradition." In 1 Corinthians 11:2, for example, Paul commends the Corinthian Christians for "maintaining the traditions" (*paradoseis*) he delivered to them. In 11:23 he reminds them of the tradition of the Lord's supper and in 15:3–7 of the Lord's resurrection. Elsewhere, in Romans 6:17 Paul gives thanks to God that the Roman Christians obeyed the form of teaching in which they were "traditioned" (*paredothete*). And he encourages the Thessalonians to "keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition (*paradosin*) that you received from us" (2 Thess 3:6). Clearly, that which Paul "received" and "passed on" as tradition (*paradosis*) consisted not only of the message and teachings of the Gospel (e.g., 1 Cor 15:1–3), but also included instructions about the Lord's supper (1 Cor 11:2, 23–25), baptismal and moral instructions (e.g., 1 Thess 4:1–2 and Col 3:1–15), and even church polity —"keep away from any brother who . . ." (2 Thess 3:6).

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[2] The traditions of the scribes and Pharisees did not honor and pass on God's revealed will. For a community to exist over time as an "anti-tradition community" it would have to develop effective practices to ensure that no traditions were developing. Ironically, such anti-tradition practices would become, in effect, anti-tradition traditions. The alternative to weak or distorted traditions is responsible and faithful traditions, not attempting to exist in history without traditions.

For Paul, these traditions (teachings and practices) were authoritative; they were received (or had their origin) "from the Lord" (1 Cor 11:23). Significantly, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to "stand firm and hold to the traditions (*paradoseis*) which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thess 2:15). It is important to notice that Paul does not tell his readers precisely how to hold—to protect and pass on—the traditions. That is, Paul does not specify the means by which the church should preserve the teachings and practices entrusted to it, nor does he specify the manner in which it should convey the faith to subsequent generations. Obviously, however, procedures and practices that enabled the church to preserve the faith also became part of the wisdom which the church handed down.[3]

It is important to note that although the developing traditions and practices reflected the social and cultural environments of the church, they also developed directly out of the church honoring its commission to embody, protect, and faithfully pass on the apostolic teachings and instructions with which it had been entrusted.

Tradition in the Church

For the first Christians, the decisive act of God's revelation in Christ was witnessed and reported by the apostles and embodied in the life of the church. As the early church made its way in the Hellenistic world, it faced difficulties and challenges both from outside the church and from within. In a relatively short time, the church self-consciously began identifying, collect-

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[3]In the second century, for example, we see Christians being encouraged to say the Lord's Prayer three times a day (*Didache*), drawing up summaries of central beliefs, or "rules of faith" (Justin Martyr, Tertullian), and being instructed not to engage in arguments about scripture with heretics (Tertullian). Toward the end of the second century, church buildings began to appear. Over the centuries, other practices and traditions would develop, including baptisteries, collections of scripture, catechetical/educational materials, hymns and hymn collections, and so on.

ing, and protecting the received (authoritative) traditions as recorded in the writings of the apostles and their associates. In order to protect itself and carry out its commission, the church also began developing traditions (wise practices) necessary to ensure its faithfulness in teaching, protecting, and passing on that which it had received. Drawing upon various sources (synagogue, etc.), including its own experience, the early church organized its life in a manner that would enable it to survive without compromising the message and way of life entrusted to it in the Gospel. Under the apostolic charge to "hold the traditions" (2 Thess 2:15), "entrust to faithful men what you have heard" (2 Tim 2:2), and "continue in what you have learned" (2 Tim 3:14), the early church consciously developed and adopted traditions appropriate to and consistent with carrying out its commission.

The active presence of God in the life of the early church, however, was not understood as having ceased with the apostles and the apostolic church. Rather, as the church continued to make its way through history—facing challenges and opportunities—it understood itself as living in the presence of the risen Lord and the Holy Spirit, and equipped with the witness of scripture. The apostolic exhortation of 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22 well captures the dynamics of the post-apostolic church's stance as it makes its way through the ebb and flow of history: "Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil." Paul's injunctions, "test, hold fast . . ." and "do not quench the Spirit" stand in tension.

Either injunction, taken alone, may lead the church into disaster. To "hold fast" without being open to new possibilities and opportunities leads to a petrified church, mimicking a receding past, irrelevant to the present and future. Contrariwise, a church that—however innocently—embraces everything new as "the work of God's Spirit" is a church whose identity soon

becomes overwhelmed by the shifting forces of its surrounding culture and the caprice of human hearts.

The apostolic instructions, collected in Christian scripture, provided the church with fixed points by which to navigate its way through the challenges, opportunities, and uncertainties it encountered in its unfolding history. The church charts its course under the guidance of the unrepeatable and indispensable record of apostolic teachings and instructions incorporated in scripture. Succinctly, all subsequent ecclesiastical, or church tradition is continually subordinated to apostolic tradition. For the post-apostolic church, the New Testament provides "the essential norm against which the Church of every age has to measure itself."[4]

And yet, recourse to scripture does not relieve the church from having to make difficult decisions. Clearly, scripture can be and has been used to underwrite and legitimate ventures that are in fact not consistent with its underlying meaning and intent. It is wise to remember the advice that we more nearly hear the voice of the apostolic tradition when we are open to it challenging us and standing against our desires and aspirations—especially our religious aspirations.[5] Hendrikus Berkhof reminds us:

> [T]he history of the church is full of indications that Scripture has again and again acted as a guiding, correcting, and liberating counter-authority. There is a subtle but profound difference between usurping Scripture for our own views and desires and the willingness to be guided by what it really says.[6]

Tradition Today

Today, modern Americans tend to approach the idea of religious tradition with apprehension. Reasons for this attitude are not difficult to identify.

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[4]Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1976; German orig., 1967), 46.

[5]See Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 94f.

[6]Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 96.

Deep roots go back at least to the Enlightenment when traditions, especially religious traditions, were viewed as the residue of centuries of superstition, ignorance, and authoritarian religion. This ignorance needed to be dispelled by the light of human reason, thought to be especially evidenced in the sciences and emerging technologies.

Similarly, the American experience was one of establishing a new order and breaking free from Old World customs and traditions.[7] For Protestants, significantly Restorationists, the burden of Christendom had been the accumulation of denominational traditions which were seen to distort biblical faith and divide Christians. Lastly, the modern outlook, shaped by head-spinning social changes and the accelerated appearance of ever-advancing technologies in the form of entertainment devices, automobiles, microwaves, etc., is characterized by impatience and almost an addiction to what is new and different.

Tradition at Twin Pines Church of Christ

Twin Pines Church of Christ stands in tradition (Protestant, Restoration) and has itself initiated several traditions ("wise practices") in carrying out its apostolic commission to "stand firm and hold the tradition" (2 Thess 2:15) as Christ's church.[8] For example, from the sixteenth-century

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[7]See David Steinmetz, *Memory and Mission: Theological Reflections on the Christian Past* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 17ff. See also D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 17f.

[8] For discussion of tradition in Churches of Christ, see Michael R. Weed, "A Tradition at Risk," *Christian Studies* 11.2 (1991): 41–56; "Guest Editorial: Tradition Provides Continuity for Church," *Christian Chronicle*, June 1991; Michael R. Weed, "The Church Today: A Call for Wisdom in an Uncertain Future," *Leaven* 2 no. 3 (1993): 29–31; and Gary Holloway and Michael R. Weed, "The Gospel in Urban Vessels: Churches of Christ Face the Twenty-first Century," *Discipliana* 55 (1995): 109–121.

Reformation and the Reformed tradition, Twin Pines Church places a communion table in front of the pulpit to convey that the church is a community called into existence by the covenant symbolized by the bread, cup, and open Bible displayed on the table. No clergyman or ordinand stands between the congregation and access to communion. Particular to its own tradition of returning to the beliefs and practices of the early church, its hymn service is *a cappella*. Twin Pines periodically sings metrical arrangements of the Psalms and occasionally reads scripture responsively in worship. Further, Twin Pines' elders have chosen, when projecting hymns or texts, to make paper copies available to all those present. This practice reflects concern for those with impaired vision and also for children who, although learning to read, cannot see over adults. This also enables all worshipers to re-read and reflect on the meaning of hymns and texts. The church also commonly offers an invitation after the Sunday morning sermon, and it practices believer's baptism—immersion for the remission of sins—as entry into the body of Christ.

Twin Pines Church has been innovative in adapting and developing a number of traditions such as concluding weekly communion meditations with the words of Jesus, reading select Old and New Testament texts in Sunday morning worship, and having the baptizer pray with the newly baptized immediately after a baptism. Other traditions at Twin Pines include requiring marriage counseling of those married by Twin Pines ministers, giving no attention to anonymous communications, and not considering persons for service as elders/presbyters until they have been members at Twin Pines for at least two years. All of the above traditions have been developed with a view toward enabling Twin Pines Church members to know the Christian faith, live faithful lives, and pass on the faith to coming generations already present in the congregation as children and grandchildren.

Conclusion

To dismiss the importance of wise practices and traditions that we have received from generations that have gone before us is a recipe for unstable churches and superficial faith. To alter or dismiss a practice because "it's merely a tradition," or to promote an innovation simply because "there's no verse against it"—much less, "other churches are doing it"—is an invitation to make the church vulnerable to the shifting winds of the surrounding culture and to discard centuries of Christian wisdom. While we often need a better understanding of the meaning and purpose of existing traditions, lack of understanding is no basis for discarding a tradition.

To revise or replace a tradition wisely is to do so with a *better* tradition, i.e., a practice that better accomplishes the tasks of guarding that which has been entrusted to the church and of passing on the faith. One should ask, "Does the proposed practice/tradition better enable the church to 'hold the traditions' (2 Thess 2:15), to 'entrust to faithful men what you have heard' (2 Tim 2:2), to 'continue in what you have learned' (2 Tim 3:13), and to guard the church against threats from both within and without?" Or, does the new practice, however unintentionally, yield to pressures of the surrounding culture—and perhaps especially the emerging "church culture"? Unless such considerations have been carefully weighed, received traditions should not be abandoned.

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One hundred years from now, if baseball is still being played, baseball players will practice fielding grounders and flies, take batting practice, run wind sprints, honor a curfew, and submit to weight checks. None of these disciplines is required by the rules of the game. They are, however, extremely important for fielding a team capable of playing the game of baseball well and for developing a "winning tradition." Over time, some training prac-

tices/traditions change (e.g., many trainers no longer encourage athletes to run stadium steps due to indications this may damage knee cartilage), and new training methods replace older ones because they better accomplish the task of equipping baseball players to play the game of baseball well.

One thing is certain–one hundred years from now, if baseball is still being played, successful baseball teams—whether Little League or the Cleveland Indians—will rigorously practice the disciplines necessary for playing baseball well.

Would anyone expect less of churches entrusted with equipping children and adults to live faithful lives?

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CHRISTIAN STUDIES
Number 21 2005/2006 ©

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