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FOREWORD

We live in a time when tradition is suspect, perhaps religious tradition doubly so. Easily forgotten is the truth that civilization is delicately borne on the thin threads of memory and tradition. Amid the excitement of finding new things, it is easy to forget the importance of sifting and refining the received truths--collected wisdom and insight--of the past.

The church is a community founded on a tradition and charged with the task of faithfully transmitting traditions embodying ancient wisdom and insight. The first responsibility of each generation of Christians is not the breathless pursuit of the new, the vogue, or the contemporary. It is the task of holding fast that which we have received, making it our own, and faithfully handing it to the next generation.

Today there is much confusion about tradition. The essays in this issue of *Christian Studies* are presented in order to promote reflection on the meaning of tradition in the life of the church.

I would especially like to thank Mrs. Denise James for her capable and cheerful assistance in preparing this issue of *Christian Studies*.

Michael R. Weed, *Editor*



What Every Christian Should Know: Tradition in the Early Church

James W. Thompson

Tevye's song, "Tradition," in *Fiddler on the Roof*, celebrated an idea that has seldom been appreciated in American culture. While tradition was valuable to the Jews of the *stetl* in Russia, keeping their lives from being as "shaky as a fiddler on the roof," Americans have more often regarded tradition as a matter to be overcome or jettisoned. We would be more likely to celebrate the untraditional and the modern as the foundation for our existence than the inheritance from the past.

The rejection of tradition is a fundamental feature of the American consciousness. Historians have commented on the fact that the American experiment was actually regarded by its intellectual leaders as a restoration of an ancient order which could be found in the golden age of ancient Greece. The neoclassical architecture of the public buildings in Washington reflected this attempt to return to an earlier golden age. Similarly, the democratic principles enunciated were understood as a restoration of an earlier golden age. Such a restoration was thus a rejection of centuries of tradition that had been developed in Europe. As the words on the back of the one dollar bill indicate, the American experiment was a *novus ordo seclorum*, a "new order of the ages." The rejection of the authority of tradition became a distinguishing aspect of American life.

If Americans have preferred the new and the modern over the old and the traditional, restorationists have especially resisted tradition. Indeed, the restorationist slogan of "back to the Bible" was, like the American challenge of removing the accumulated traditions of centuries, a call to return to the beginning and to reject the legacy from the intervening years. Consequently, the

word "tradition" was commonly modified by such adjectives as "mere," "human," and "just." Thus Tevye's appreciation of tradition has been scarcely intelligible to restorationists for whom tradition remains something to overcome. Tevye's culture, with its appreciation of tradition, is far removed from our own emphasis on the importance of modernity.

In this essay I wish to reconsider the place of tradition in the life of the church by reflecting on its place in earliest Christianity. Here also a community recognized that it lived in a "new order of the ages" where "the old has passed away" and the "new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). What role would tradition play in a movement which gave such emphasis on being in a "new world?" Would all tradition belong to the old world that has passed away? Or would this community distinguish carefully between the traditions that were to be discarded and those which were to be preserved? If the community found a place for tradition, what role would it play? These questions are, I believe, relevant for the life of the contemporary church, for we are confronted with questions regarding the traditions we have inherited.

Early Christianity as the Rejection of Tradition

The rejection of tradition, one may argue with some justification, is rooted in the fact that Christianity originated as a challenge to established tradition. The Pharisees objected to the fact that Jesus and his disciples did not follow the "traditions of the elders" (Matt. 15:1; cf. Mark 7:3), the oral tradition which had been passed on to provide a "fence around the law." Jesus objected to the Pharisees' appeal to tradition, indicating that they had allowed the tradition to supersede the commandment of God. "So, for the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God" (Matt. 15:6). Unlike the Pharisees, who appealed to the tradition which had been handed on for generations in settling legal disputes, Jesus regularly appealed directly to the original will of God, and not to the tradition. He was expected by his listeners to answer legal questions in a way that was typical for rabbis, and

he took up major themes that were discussed in the Jewish tradition. When he discussed such themes as oaths, vows, purity laws, divorce, and the sabbath, he addressed topics that were discussed at length in the Jewish oral tradition. However, the distinguishing fact about Jesus' approach is that he "taught with authority and not as the scribes," who regularly appealed to the tradition.

One may also appeal to the apostle Paul for support in rejecting tradition. Paul describes the time before his conversion as the period in which he advanced beyond his contemporaries, "so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers" (Gal. 1:14). He then declares that the dominant influence on his life was not the inherited tradition, but the revelation which came in Jesus Christ. Indeed, he counts his advancement in the Jewish tradition as loss for the sake of knowing Christ. In his letter to the Colossians, he warns his readers against the negative influence of human tradition: "See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ" (Col. 2:8). For Paul, "human tradition" stood in opposition to the revelation in Christ.¹

The Role of Tradition in the Early Church

Although Jesus and Paul objected to human traditions which became substitutes for the word of God, the Christian movement inevitably embraced traditions of its own. Although Jesus himself rejected aspects of Jewish traditions, his own words and deeds were later preserved as traditions for the church. Such traditions reflected the church's concern to provide an accurate memory and standard for life in the kingdom.²

¹J.I.H. McDonald, *Kerygma and Didache* (Cambridge: University Press, 1980) 112.

²McDonald, 106.

For Paul, the formation of new churches also required traditions which served as a body of knowledge to guide the entire community. The importance of tradition is suggested in his words to the Corinthians: "I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you" (11:2). In 2 Thessalonians 2:15 Paul also indicated the importance of tradition for the development of the church. "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word or by letter." A similar statement of the importance of tradition is suggested later in the same epistle: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the traditions that you received from us" (2 Thess. 3:6). The formation of churches involved not only the obedience to the proclamation of Christ; it also involved the passing on of traditions that would shape the common life.

The importance of tradition for the churches of Paul is also suggested by the extensive vocabulary which he employs from his background in Pharisaic Judaism. He refers to information that he "received" (*paralambano*) and subsequently "delivered" (*paradidomi*) to the churches after their conversion (1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3). This language is derived from Judaism, where traditions were "received" and "delivered" in the process of handing on the community's stories and its laws.³ On numerous occasions Paul reminds his communities of traditions which he had handed on to them in person or in his letters (cf. 1 Cor. 11:23; 15:1, 3; Gal. 1:9, 12; 1 Thess. 2:13; 4:1). In Philippians 4:9 he refers to the instruction which the readers had received: "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do." The formation of a congregation was thus not complete until it received instruction in the traditions which had been handed on.

³A. Grabner-Haider, *Paraklese und Eschatologie bei Paulus*. Muenster: Aschen-dorff, 1968) 25.

The traditions which Paul handed on to the communities were never merely human traditions. Unlike the personal advice which Paul offers in 1 Corinthians, the traditions he passes on were "not the word of men, but the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13). He gives instructions in the traditions "through the Lord Jesus" (1 Thess. 4:2), and he assures his community that these instructions are "the will of God" (1 Thess. 4:3). The extensive teaching ministry which Paul conducted after his hearers "turned to God" (1 Thess. 1:9-10) attests to the importance of traditions containing a body of knowledge for the continued existence of the church. Without a body of information, contained in the traditions which Paul passed on, the formation of the community would have been impossible.

The traditions which Paul handed on to a young church in Thessalonica would not have been different from those which were passed on in other communities. Indeed, Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 4:17 that what the congregation has been taught is the same "in all the churches." Thus tradition was a unifying force among the churches.

What Every Christian Should Know: 1 Thessalonians

The significance of tradition for the life of the church is especially to be seen in 1 Thessalonians, Paul's earliest letter. This letter of friendship, written shortly after the formation of that community as a continuation of both the pastoral work first initiated by Paul at the time of the conversion of the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:9-10) and Timothy's ministry (cf. 1 Thess. 3:6), continues the work which had been interrupted by Paul's sudden departure from Thessalonica. As Paul indicates in recalling the days immediately following their conversion, he had worked night and day while he "preached . . . the gospel of the kingdom of God" (1 Thess. 2:9). Then he indicates that his preaching was followed by his task of shaping the congregation. "Like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you

and charged you to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory" (2:11).

Paul's task of exhorting the Thessalonians is continued in the epistle. The frequent references to what the Thessalonians already know indicates the importance of traditions for the new congregation. Throughout the epistle we find the formula: "Just as you know" (1:5; 2:1, 4, 11; 3:3, 4; 4:2; 5:1ff).⁴ Paul's essential concern is that the Thessalonians remember what he said to them. The knowledge of a body of information is vital to their continued health. Indeed Paul indicates that the congregation has already been taught (1 Thess. 4:9) and that there is no need for him to repeat what they already know (cf. 5:1). Even when the Christians are already doing what they should, Paul nevertheless reminds them of the traditions which they know already. Christian communication, both in direct speech and in letters, consists of handing on a body of knowledge. Because Paul considered the ignorance of the traditions devastating for the life of the church, his letter consisted largely of the repetition of what his readers had heard already. The first obligation of the apostle vis-a-vis a community is to make the faithful remember what they have received and already know--or should know.⁵

Paul appeals to the church's traditions both in epistles which are not written in response to specific crises, as in 1 Thessalonians, and in epistles when the church faces serious new issues, as in 1 Corinthians. In both instances the formation of the community requires that the community be reminded of its heritage. Indeed, Paul states as a purpose in writing Romans that he has written "by way of reminder" (Rom. 15:15). Indeed many of the epistles, like 1 Thessalonians, serve as reminders of what the congregation knows already.⁶

⁴See Abraham Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 70-6.

⁵N. Dahl, "Memory and Commemoration," *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976) 15.

⁶Dahl, 16.

What was the content of the traditions which Christians were expected to know? The community's traditions involve, in the first place, a reminder of the content of the original preaching which the Christians believed at the beginning of their Christian existence (cf. 1 Thess. 1:9-10; 2:2, 5). The reference to the Thessalonians' conversion undoubtedly echoes Paul's original proclamation.⁷ His instruction on the return of Christ (4:13-18) is also probably a reminder of his early proclamation, when they were taught that they "wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:10). Indeed, Paul's presentation of a "word of the Lord" in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 suggests that post-baptismal instruction included traditions from the words of Jesus, which were intended to guide the church in its understanding of the Christian faith.

The other epistles also indicate that the community's tradition consisted of the content of the original preaching. The importance of the community's memory of the original proclamation is especially evident in 1 Corinthians 15, when Paul confronts a community which had either abandoned or misunderstood the Christian view of the resurrection. In order to clarify the Christian understanding, Paul "reminds" the Corinthians "in what terms" he had originally preached the gospel, which they had "received" and to which they must hold fast. He employs the traditional rabbinic terminology for passing on tradition to recall that he "delivered" to the Corinthians what he had earlier "received" from his predecessors. The language suggests that Paul inherited a fixed tradition shortly after his conversion, and that the Corinthian church had learned the tradition from Paul. One may assume that Paul had taught this same tradition in all of the churches. In the absence of quotation marks, the word "that" functions to identify the precise words of the quotation:

⁷Malherbe, 60.

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.

The carefully-balanced words would have been appropriate for committing to memory. They formed the irreducible content of the Christian tradition, which Paul and the other apostles proclaimed (cf. 15:11). In the context of theological debates within the church, Paul appeals to the tradition, which serves as the basis for discussion because it is the common property of the whole church.

In numerous other passages in the Pauline writings, the apostle appeals to the traditions which are either the content of the gospel or the interpretation of the essential content of the gospel (cf. Rom. 1:3-4; 10:9-10; 2 Cor. 5:19). These traditions provide the point of orientation for the church's identity and the common property of all Christians. Because Paul had inherited the tradition from his predecessors in Jerusalem, he could assume that these traditions were authoritative for the whole church. While these traditions are known to the church already, Paul frequently appeals to them because he is certain that his communities need reminders of the content of the saving proclamation. The traditions serve as the community's reminders.

The community's traditions serve, in the second place, to provide guidance concerning different aspects of daily life. The formation of the community had only begun when the members "turned to God from idols to serve the true and living God" (cf. 1 Thess. 1:9-10). Proclamation was followed by occasions when Paul "exhorted," "encouraged," and "charged" his new converts to "lead a life worthy of God" (1 Thess. 2:12). According to 1 Thessalonians 4:1, Paul has already explained to his converts "how to walk and please God." In 1 Thessalonians 4:3, he indicates that "how one pleases God" involves abstaining from fornication. Inasmuch as he challenges the Thessalonians to continue "even

more" in their present conduct, one may conclude that Paul's teaching is not a response to a crisis, but moral instruction which he customarily handed on and then repeated. Similarly, in the instructions which follow, Paul proceeds to teach the community about brotherly love, and says, "You have no need to have anyone write to you" (4:9). The new Christians have already received distinct traditions involving Christian sexual morality and brotherly love.

The extent of the specific Christian moral traditions that were handed on to congregations cannot be known with certainty. From 1 Thessalonians we can ascertain that Christians received instructions on sexual morality and the brotherly love that was necessary for forming a community. In 1 Corinthians Paul appeals to traditions, not only to remind the community of its proclamation, but also to settle issues that are facing the congregation. When the Corinthians distort the Lord's Supper, Paul cites the tradition of the last supper (1 Cor. 11:23-26) and assumes that his readers already know the tradition. When Paul answers questions on divorce, he appeals to the tradition of the words of Jesus (1 Cor. 7:10). In appealing to the traditions, Paul assumes that the community recognizes that they are authoritative for the community's faith and practice.

Conclusion

The New Testament does not distinguish between tradition and the will of God, but rather between authoritative tradition and the tradition which subverts the will of God. In the formation of new churches, the missionary's task was not complete when the community responded in faith to the proclamation of Christ. In teaching the community how to please God, the apostle's work continued when he handed on traditions and continually reminded the congregations of the traditions which were normative for its life. These traditions comprised a significant body of knowledge.

If Paul held that the vitality of the church demands that it be reminded consistently of its traditions, we will do well to take

seriously the importance of the church's acquaintance with its normative traditions. While our culture places great value on what is novel and original, Paul's ministry serves as a reminder of the importance of repetition of basic traditions. To observe Paul in his task of forming a new church is to recognize the continuity between the original proclamation and the occasions when the church must be "exhorted, encouraged, and charged to lead a life worthy of God" (cf. 1 Thess. 2:13). The community's traditions comprise what every Christian should know in order to please God.

Paul provides an appropriate model for the task of every church leader in the formation of the church. The temptation of the leader is to attempt short-term answers to the problems facing the church. New and original ideas are often thought to be the key to maintaining the interest of the congregation, inasmuch as we are a society which continually looks for the new and the original in programs and educational curricula. The Pauline model is to shape a community by appealing to traditions that are well known to the community. A congregation which has heard the basic gospel of the death and resurrection of Christ does not move on to new ideas without constantly being reminded of the original proclamation. In the same way, the educational curriculum may address a variety of ideas, but it always addresses new ideas as it continues a dialogue with its tradition.



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