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Baptists and Tradition

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WHEN Christ and the Apostle Paul denounced men who obscured the truth of God by their traditions (Matt. 15:2-6, Mark 7:3-14, Gal. 1:14, Col. 2:8), neither of them appears to have had in mind the exact problem we face when we look at Scripture and Tradition. We come closer to our field when St. Paul writes about "the traditions" (2 Thess. 2:15, 3:6), since we may assume that he had doctrinal (or kerygmatic) rather than moral or liturgical matters in mind. We assume that he was referring to such matters as "Jesus is Lord" (I Cor. 12:3) and the saving faith and confession he mentions in Romans 10:9-10. But even he did not face our problem, of a church in possession of a canon of Scripture, with historic creeds that claim to be apostolic (without any historical evidence that is completely convincing), and of various bodies with schemes of government and ways of worship that vary widely. I shall argue that the canonizing of Scripture deliberately and wholesomely tied the hands of the church in some matters, but that in other matters it remained free, and still remains free—as in schemes of self-government and ways of worship.

Since Christianity is not a philosophy excogitated in the study by one man or many but good news concerning certain divine acts which have taken place in history, it follows that all Christians must in some form hold some view of tradition. Unless certain events had taken place many years ago, Christianity would not now exist. It is when we ask such questions as to what precisely did happen nearly two thousand years ago, how did the multiplicity of Christian churches now in the world come into being, what right have they to call themselves churches of Christ and speak and minister in His name, what guarantee have we that these churches are proclaiming accurately the kerygma of the early church and producing in their members the authentic experience of reconciliation to God and the new life in Christ, it is then that we find ourselves in serious disagreement and indeed in open contradiction. This paper is written by one who stands in the Baptist tradition, which means within the Reformed tradition of the church as this found expression in the left-wing of the Reformation and in the "dissidence of dissent." In discussing this question concerning tradition, I have tried to keep two questions constantly in mind:

(a) What attitude towards tradition is implicit in our historic non-conformist emphasis?

(b) Are there any grounds for believing that other church traditions have preserved essential elements which we have either lost or ignored, and which ought to be incorporated again into our thinking and practice, and vice versa?

The nature and authority of Scripture must first claim our attention, since the antithesis between Scripture and ecclesiastical tradition is usually considered to involve one of the deepest divisions between many Protestants on the one side and the Roman Catholic, High Anglican and the Greek Orthodox views on the other side. The question is indeed of crucial importance and on our answer to it will depend in the last analysis our interpretation of the apostolic tradition, the nature of the ministry and the sacraments, the kind of institutional continuity which the church demands, in short, what constitutes the very essence of the gospel itself.

In the limited space at our disposal, there is no time for a thorough discussion of all the important questions involved. Suffice it to summarize here the basic assumptions which must underlie any reasoned defence of the Protestant claim that tradition must be subordinate to Scripture. It is generally agreed that the canon of Scripture was only achieved as the result of a process of selection extended over a considerable period of time. The Jewish canon of the Old Testament was not closed until early in the Christian era¹ and the New Testament canon was not complete until the fourth Christian century.² The decision to set apart these particular books was taken by the church. It was the common spiritual judgment of the majority of Christians which produced the canon. We must not, however, deduce from this what I believe to be a false conclusion, namely that because the Scriptures emerged from within the Christian community and received their unique position because of the judgment of the church, therefore the church is supreme over the Scripture and their infallible interpreter. The Church created the canon of Scripture in order to combat the errors and heresies which appealed to a secret and unwritten apostolic tradition which no one could check. In Professor Cullmann's words "by establishing the principle of the canon, the Church recognized in that very act that *from that moment* the tradition was no longer a criterion of the truth . . . by what we may call an act of humility, she submitted all subsequent tradition to be elaborated by herself to the supreme criterion of the apostolic tradition, codified in the Holy Scriptures."³ We cannot exalt the authority of the church and at the same time renounce the decision which the church itself made in regard to Scripture. My basic premise, therefore, is that all forms of tradition must be judged in the light of the Scriptural norm which the church, by her own act and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit established.

Who, then, is to frame the proper interpretation of the Scriptural norm? If Scripture is itself the record of a long historical process, what events within that process are the key events which give us the clue to the meaning of the whole? And who selects and decides the interpretation of these events? Is it New Testament scholars, a college of professors or the church, and if

1. H. W. Robinson, *The Old Testament in the Making*.

2. A. H. McNeile (Revised C. S. C. Williams), *Introduction to the Study of the New Testament*.

3. O. Cullmann, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 6, no. 2.

so, which communion or denomination or combination of such? It may be argued that the individual, alone with his Bible, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can be led to that act of faith which produces the correct interpretation of the events. One can hardly deny the reality of this experience, but the very fact that he possesses the Bible at all, means that he stands in some sense within the tradition of the church, whether he consciously acknowledges it or not. On the other hand, it is affirmed that the church is the only reliable interpreter of Scripture both because the Scripture emerged out of the church's life and because the Holy Spirit is active only "in the common life within the Body of Christ." Since the individual Christian is not an isolated atom but owes his very existence to some continuing corporate expression of Christian worship, life and witness, the solution must lie somewhere in this second position. It is often assumed, however, that to admit this is to hand ourselves over irrevocably to one of the existing forms of ecclesiastical tradition. This conclusion is often defended on the grounds that the church in one or other of its forms is the inheritor of an oral tradition derived from Christ and the original apostles which enables it to interpret Scripture in the light of a knowledge given to it from non-written sources. It is well known that the gnostics claimed to possess such a secret tradition, and that one of the strongest reasons for establishing the canon was to set up a norm which was not at the mercy of an arbitrary appeal to a secret tradition which no one could check. Since the church has established the canon, however, we are no longer justified in appealing to an oral tradition, secret or otherwise, which contradicts the apostolic witness given in the Scripture.

It may, however, be argued that the continuity of the church's living tradition can be accepted without such an appeal to oral tradition. The Christian *koinonia* has had a continuous life from the first calling of the twelve apostles and, while Scripture was in process of formation, the gospel was being preached, men were being saved and baptized, Christians were partaking of the bread and wine and engaging in private devotion and corporate worship. This fellowship, developing and growing like a living organism, naturally gave rise to various traditions, theological, liturgical and in the realm of polity, which must remain authoritative and binding for any man or church which wishes to remain in real continuity with that fellowship of the Spirit through which the divine life of the risen Lord pulsates. That there is real truth in this contention, a truth to which those of my own tradition have often failed to do justice, may be admitted. It is also a fact that it is extraordinarily difficult to decide how and in what precise manner this continuity has been maintained, once we abandon the idea of an infallible ecclesiastical institution. It seems to me at any rate that the latter conception is impossible to hold if we regard Scripture as in any sense containing the authentic apostolic tradition, and if we make an unprejudiced study of the history of the church in the early centuries.

It is sometimes contended that the Protestant, who makes Scripture the

norm by which tradition is judged, is compelled to hold a static view of the church, that he cannot make room for any real continuity and growth in the church's life, that he is constantly trying to begin again and to create the church afresh, *de novo* as it were, under the direct guidance of the Spirit. However justified this reproach may be when levelled against particular individuals, I do not think it is inherent in our position, though I confess that many of us find it difficult to trace the essential continuity of the church's life through any specific form of ecclesiastical organization. The problem may be put in the form of a question: In what sense does the unity and continuity of the tradition demand at least a minimum agreement and uniformity in theological affirmation, liturgical practice and forms of polity?

Let us turn first to the role of tradition in relation to theological affirmation, that aspect of the problem on which we propose to concentrate more especially. Is there a theological minimum without which there can be no authentic Christian knowledge and experience of God? Is there a theological continuity which runs from the first apostolic witness to the contemporary church? Has the faith once delivered to the saints been preserved in one church or in several churches, from the Roman Catholic at the one extreme to the multiplicity of Protestant sects at the other, not to mention what Horton Davies calls the Christian deviations in Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses or even, as he unkindly suggests, M.R.A. If there is a kerygma, where is it to be found? However plausible the Vincentian rule may have been at the time it was formulated,⁴ the attempt today to decide the essentials of the faith by an appeal to that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all seems to involve us in an almost impossible collection of theological affirmations which are extremely difficult to reconcile in one coherent body of theological doctrine. In face of this situation, it is easy to argue that if every man is to be his own Pope and the infallible interpreter of Scripture, the result must inevitably be theological anarchy and the only safeguard must be some form of authoritative church which has preserved the kerygma and is able to interpret its meaning to the ordinary man. The problem may appear to be even more acute for Baptists and other nonconformist groups who have been suspicious of credal subscription and have seldom used any of the great ecumenical creeds of the early church in their worship. Are we not, then, left with a purely arbitrary selection from Scripture and tradition with no guarantee that we have the original and authentic witness to the Word of Life?

I reply that the ultimate safeguard against arbitrary subjectivity is to be found in the Bible and the witness it bears to those divine events in and through which God has made Himself known to men. Nor is it sufficient objection to say that this still leaves the interpretation of Scripture at the mercy of individual judgment. In a sense, it does, but we might as well recognize that this will always be the case. There is an ultimacy of the inner

4. W. P. Paterson, *The Rule of Faith*, Appendix B, pp. 426-7.

light, especially if we define it with Dr. C. J. Cadoux as "the whole of those internal powers and endowments which enable the individual to appropriate divine reality."⁵ The inner light here not only covers intellect and reason in the narrow sense, but the appreciation of all absolute values and man's responsiveness to the divine reality, such as Dr. Farmer describes in his Gifford Lectures.⁶ Nor is this disposed of by crying, "Subjective, subjective!" One does not solve the problem of objectivity in the sense which religion demands by appealing to external realities such as Scripture and Church. If man is incapable through his moral and religious experience of knowing God, then all authorities of whatever kind are quite incapable of giving him any direct knowledge of the ultimately real. This does not deny the principle of mediation in God's revealing of Himself to men, but it does mean that the inner response is required for the ultimate authority of truth itself to become manifest. "The ground for believing the Bible to be inspired beyond any other book is that, more than any other book, it comes home to the individual, it speaks to his condition, it answers the deepest needs of his own life, it saves him, as he sees that it has saved and still saves others. This, and in the last resort only this, is our proof that the Scriptures are of God."⁷

Nor can we assume without question that a majority vote necessarily decides matters of theological truth or error. Ultimately the only authority which God has over a free creature is the authority of the truth as this evokes the allegiance of the whole man. This does not rule out the importance and necessity of secondary authority but it does mean that these are authoritative for me only insofar as they mediate to me truth which I acknowledge to be such. We may prefer to explain this theologically in terms of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, as I myself would do, but that does not alter the fact that the Holy Spirit's activity works in and through my own apprehension of spiritual truth, unless we are going to say that the Holy Spirit may guide me to accept that which on various grounds I do not believe to be true, which is immoral and an abandonment of intellectual integrity. This does not mean that for the Christian, truth is a purely private matter, unrelated to the way in which God has revealed Himself or to the continuous experience of Christian men down the ages.

What, then, is the kerygma, the theological minimum without which we can hardly conceive of Christianity in any form as existing at all? Just as our various theories of the physical universe do not alter the fact that there is something there to be explored, which is not merely a figment of our imagination, so God's revelation in history has about it a massive objectivity to which sooner or later we shall have to adjust ourselves. Furthermore, the Bible and the corporate existence of the church, though fragmented, present a body of fact and interpretation of fact with which the individual Christian must obviously come to terms. I am quite prepared to admit that many

5. C. J. Cadoux, *Catholicism and Christianity*, p. 119.

6. H. H. Farmer, *Religion and Revelation*.

7. Cadoux, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

nonconformists have an unfortunate habit of jumping from the New Testament to the Reformation and assuming that nothing of any significance happened in the intervening period. We have not valued, as perhaps we should, the great ecumenical creeds, though many Free Churchmen today would value them highly as the expression of the mind of the church in the early centuries, and as the articulation of Christian truths which have permanent significance and value for us. To accept Scripture as the norm does not mean that we must dismiss all later developments of the church's theology and worship as sheer perversion, with the exception of our own particular strand of the Protestant tradition.

Nevertheless, it does make a great difference whether tradition is regarded as co-equal with Scripture or determinative of the meaning of Scripture or whether tradition is regarded as subject to the judgment of the Word of God as this is mediated to us through the apostolic witness in the Scripture. Nor does this necessarily mean ruling out later church practices as illegitimate where there is no specific New Testament precedent. The church may be perfectly justified in developing forms of polity, framing intellectual expressions of faith and developing new forms of worship for which there is no set pattern in the New Testament. The tendency to defend infant baptism today, not from the New Testament but from the practice of the church (N. P. Williams, T. W. Manson, W. F. Flemington, O. Cullmann) is not rejected by Baptists because we think the church could not have been led by the Holy Spirit to sanction new practices helpful to its life after the apostolic period, but because, in this case, we believe there is a serious departure from a proper conception of the church inherent in that apostolic witness.

However, we have not yet defined more precisely what is meant by the Scriptural norm. Even if it is granted that Scripture in some sense provides the standard by which the tradition is to be judged, what elements in Scripture itself are central for this purpose? Dr. W. P. Paterson lists the four marks of authority, sufficiency, perspicuity and efficacy.⁸ As he interprets these, I agree. Scripture is authoritative as over against an ecclesiastically managed tradition for the reasons already given: it is sufficient for light upon the way of salvation; though obscure in parts, its basic witness to Christ is clear and unambiguous; though unedifying in parts, it is efficacious in pointing men to Christ as their Lord and Saviour.⁹ It is true that when Scripture is efficacious in this sense, it does not leave a man with a purely private religious experience. It commits him to membership of a fellowship of believers who will desire to preach the Word, celebrate the ordinances, and try to act in accordance with the mind of Christ. The corporate life thus established, however, will not contradict the essential affirmations of the Scripture.

What, then, are these essential affirmations? In my judgment, Prof. J. N. Kelly is right in claiming that though "it is anachronistic to attribute to the

8. W. P. Paterson, *The Rule of Faith*, p. 61.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

apostolic church an official, textually determined confession of faith, the New Testament documents themselves testify to the existence of a corpus of distinctively Christian teaching."¹⁰ C. H. Dodd¹¹, Oscar Gullmann¹² and Prof. Kelly himself have endeavoured to state what those beliefs were.¹³ Let us take the latter's summary of Prof. Dodd's material as a basis. The core of the primitive kerygma consisted "in the proclamation that Jesus of Nazareth, of the lineage of David, had come as Son of God and Messiah; that He wrought mighty acts and gave a new and authoritative teaching or law; that He was crucified, died and was buried; that He rose again on the third day and was exalted to the right hand of God, victorious over principalities and powers; and that He will come again to judge the living and the dead. The setting of all this was the conviction, openly announced, that the Apostles and those in fellowship with them constituted the new Israel of God, the heir of the ancient promises, and were marked out as such by the manifest outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Those who embraced this gospel, repented and believed in Christ, would receive the forgiveness of their sins and a share in the life of the coming age." By concentrating on the preaching, says Kelly, there is a tendency to overlook the Jewish heritage of belief in God the Father, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and in the implicit Trinitarianism of the New Testament. There is one other disadvantage in Prof. Dodd's approach and that is the way in which the kerygma is separated from the teaching of Jesus, embodied in the Sermon on the Mount, the parables and the other sayings of our Lord. Dodd himself does not wish to harden this distinction but some seem to be only too ready to leave the teaching in the background for reasons of their own. Surely the essentials of the gospel message cannot be presented without reference to the things which Jesus said, unless we doubt whether the New Testament gives us any authentic knowledge of Jesus' words at all.¹⁴ We have rejected this extreme scepticism concerning the ipsissima verba of Jesus and therefore believe that Dodd's series of affirmations distilled from the early preaching in Acts, the content of the teaching in the Sermon, parables etc., and the abiding influence of the Jewish conviction as to the one Creator God, together with the implicit Trinitarianism of the New Testament as a whole, all these constitute a considerable body of theological affirmation in the broad sense. It is difficult to conceive of a Christianity from which any of these elements has been completely excised.

This, however, by no means solves the problem of theological tradition and continuity. How shall we make sure that this theological minimum is really retained and is there not a need also to make sure that it is properly interpreted, since many different theological constructions might be put

10. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, pp. 6, 10.

11. C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*.

12. O. Gullmann, *Early Christian Confessions*.

13. Kelly, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

14. On this general question, see T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus*; C. J. Cadoux, *The Historic Mission of Jesus*; B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels*.

upon this New Testament material? The authors of the *Catholicity of Protestantism* are right in adducing at this state the "witness of the Church of Christ through the ages, spiritually and historically continuous with the Church of the apostolic age, indwelt by the living Christ and taught by the Holy Spirit."¹⁵ It is difficult to believe that any Christian would arrogantly dismiss this witness of the church and the spiritual judgment of the countless Christian men and women who have gone before. The fact remains, however, that unless we are going to have recourse again to some doctrine of infallibility, we cannot attribute to the church's witness an inerrant testimony to the living Christ. The diversity of theological opinion and judgment is obvious, and this only makes it more difficult to answer the question as to the theological minimum required. What is *de fide*, without which a man is not justified in calling himself a Christian at all? In some quarters, there is a tendency to deny that any theological minimum is required. A man is a Christian by reason of the spirit of love and his acts of kindness and mercy, not because of any special beliefs. To carry this to its logical conclusion would be to empty Christianity of all positive intellectual content whatever, and this must surely be rejected. It is also psychologically impossible to separate belief and action in the rigid way implied in this way of thinking. Granted, then, that a Christian must make some theological affirmations, however limited, what are they to be, and how can we safeguard them for each new generation of Christians?

Shall we demand a more extensive subscription to theological affirmations on the part of the ordained minister, while allowing more liberty to the layman? Are we justified in demanding as a condition of church membership for the ordinary Christian a less thorough acceptance of theological propositions than that which might be required of the clergy? The difficulty in answering this question satisfactorily arises from the fact that, though the Holy Spirit has guided the church as a whole and the divided communions of Christendom in their corporate life, He has also illuminated the consciousness of individuals to enable them to recover authentic insights into the nature of the gospel which the church may have forgotten at a particular period.¹⁶ That individuals are peculiarly liable to error in this regard does not justify us in denying such illuminating activity of the Holy Spirit outside specific church traditions. Daniel Jenkins' remark on this subject seems valid to me: "It is true that, as G. K. Chesterton has said, 'the inner light has often led to the outer darkness', though perhaps not more often than the padded chair of St. Peter has been used to quench the smoking flax."¹⁷

Baptists at any rate have always hesitated to demand theological subscription over and above the acceptance of the Scripture as decisive for faith and morals. In this, I believe they have been right, though in all honesty I must admit that we have not always clearly seen the full implications

15. R. N. Flew and R. E. Davies, *The Catholicity of Protestantism*, p. 117.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 118-19.

17. D. Jenkins, *Tradition and the Spirit*, p. 179.

of our basic position. In trying, for example, to impose a particular view of the inspiration of Scripture, say verbal infallibility, some Baptists have set up an external theological test which appeals to certain people only, instead of allowing Scripture to speak for itself without being forced into some preconceived theological dogma. The kind of theological examination, which forms part of our Canadian ordination practice, could result in theological tests as harmful to real liberty as anything imposed by other branches of the church. This has not so far happened, but it could do if we forget the true nature of what we are trying to do in the ordination service.

The question may now be asked, if we are going to put the Bible into the hands of the average man without any kind of authoritative interpretation, or without the safeguard of a theological tradition tested by the ages, will not the result be complete theological anarchy? Who knows what will happen to the kerygma when every Tom, Dick and Harry has had a try at interpretation? Let me admit frankly that the risk is real, but that it is a risk we ought to take. The religious crank, the heretic, the schismatic is the price we must pay for genuine theological liberty, and I for one value the latter highly enough to be willing to pay that price. Nor to be quite frank does it seem to me that the alternative solutions have been conspicuously successful in preserving true doctrine, if we survey the history of the church as a whole. Canon Quick has tried to defend the use of the creeds, not as test-formulae to be imposed but as standard witnesses to the church's faith.¹⁸ In this sense, even Baptists have put out confessions of faith from time to time as a guide to the believer.¹⁹ Yet history seems to show how difficult it is in practice to keep this distinction between witness to faith and assent to authoritative dogmas externally imposed. For my own part, I would be content with the acceptance of Scripture as decisive for faith and morals, while leaving considerable freedom of theological interpretation, which is bound to occur anyhow, unless we are going to use some form of coercion, whether subtle or more openly physical.

To some this will appear to be the way to disaster. Not only does it open the field to the crank but also to the radical and destructive biblical critic. In the last analysis, however, our ultimate confidence can only be in the power of God to subdue men to the truth as it is in Christ through the illuminating activity of the Holy Spirit. Through the witness of the apostolic church and its Scripture, the church of the ages and enlightened individuals, God continually evokes faith in His redemptive love and wins men and women afresh to new life in Christ. This is obviously compatible, as history shows, with a great diversity of theological affirmation, ecclesiastical organization and liturgical practice. To search the Scriptures with spiritual and intellectual integrity will, I believe, result in the elimination of theological fads and aberrations and bring men nearer to the Christ and therefore to one another, even though the process may take a long time. In any case, if

18. O. C. Quick, *Doctrines of the Creed*, p. 320.

19. Cf. Flew and Davies, *The Catholicity of Protestantism*, p. 118.

God's truth cannot in the end win the free allegiance of man, there seems to be no other Christian way by which such allegiance can be secured. Baptists, Congregationalists and others, who have not been bound by creeds or rigid forms of polity or authoritative government, have not fallen into the theological anarchy which might have been expected. There is surprising unity in adherence to the basic things in the New Testament witness. If we have had our own cranks, our heretics, and our perverters of the truth, when has that not been so with others also? It is abundantly true of the period which saw the framing of the great ecumenical creeds, and I think the evidence shows it to be so for other periods too. Neither papal infallibility nor general council nor episcopacy nor synod nor even the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec have been able at all times to ensure either theological uniformity or the permanent dominance of any one particular interpretation of the Scriptural witness. This does not mean that there is not a massive and impressive agreement in Christian witness and experience down the ages, but this has not been produced by any of the means mentioned above. It is the result of the Holy Spirit's activity in leading men to the Christ to whom Scripture testifies. The reason why the so-called revival of biblical theology has been drawing us together is that scholars have not hesitated to pursue the truth, even when it seemed to go against some particular aspect of their own tradition. In this sense, the influence of biblical theology is the fruit of that freedom which was the true glory of the old liberalism, and if the theology of the latter seems now faded and worn, the spirit in which they prosecuted the theological quest is by no means out of date. It is needed as much as ever, since the only unity the Holy Spirit strives to create is the unity of the free acceptance of the living truth as this is embodied in the Christ to whom Scripture testifies and to which all forms of Christian tradition ought to adhere.