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The Role of Tradition for Pinnock and Dulles: A Response

by David F. Wells

It is an honor to be invited to comment on the fine essays by Clark Pinnock and Avery Dulles. It is not my intention to develop any additional lines of thought or to quibble with incidental details in their presentations. Rather, I want to focus, as they have done, upon their respective uses of tradition and see if any further clarity can be found.

I begin by setting out my conclusion. Dulles' contention that Pinnock is an "evangelical who leans toward the catholic . . . alternative" while he himself is a "catholic who leans more to the evangelical . . . stance" is mistaken on both accounts. Pinnock may imagine he functions like a Catholic in his use of tradition and Dulles undoubtedly thinks that in his respect for authority he resembles an evangelical. These are, however, only optical illusions. Now let me justify this assertion.

Pinnock is attracted to tradition because he fears that if Scripture is interpreted merely in the light of inner experience—what, in another age, used to be derided by Catholics as "private judgment"—the interpreter could easily slip into relativism and hence into liberalism. He wants something objective to which to appeal and he finds this in the "sense" as to what constitutes Christian belief which has revealed itself through the ages. In interpretive matters, there is comfort in numbers, a quiet confidence that can be had from thinking that Augustine, Luther and Warfield said the very things that we ourselves are now saying. Dulles rejoices in this, imagining it to be the first step toward Rome, the second—which Pinnock has not yet taken—being the belief that only an authoritative church can interpret this "sense" aright. For, as Pinnock acknowledges, "tradition" is a many-fangled thing! This was a problem even in the patristic period. Vincent of Lerin did weave some order out of early opinions in his *Commonitoria*; but this did not prevent Peter Abelard, a little later, from revealing an astonishing array of contradictions on over 150 subjects in a book the Church—for reasons of self-preservation—suppressed. It was entitled *Liber Sententiarum Sic et Non*. If this "sense" is to be grasped with any certainty, if it is to be grasped with any infallibility, it is argued it will have to be an authoritative Church with divine sanction that alone will be able to do it. Pinnock, however, does not believe in any such authority. At most, his use of tradition is one of counsel. It is never one of command. It is one of gentle suggestion but never of infallible certainty.

But this leads on to something that is even more fundamental. The issue that divides Pinnock and Dulles is not at root one of tradition but of *revelation*. Pinnock believes God's disclosure of himself has occurred exclusively in Scripture; Dulles does not. Pinnock sees tradition as useful in eliciting the meaning of Scripture and providing some safeguard against the vagaries of experience and the parochialisms of each age. Dulles sees tradition as not merely interpreting Scripture but as itself being the vehicle of revelation. This vehicle, he asserts, is not identical

with the magisterium but is more broadly identified with the whole people of God whose collective experience is to be interpreted by the magisterium. This experience is not to be prescribed for the people by the magisterium.

Dulles is entirely correct in saying that Pinnock's understanding of what Catholics think of as tradition is a pre-Vatican II conception; indeed, it is late nineteenth-century. It lingers on in some of the current pronouncements from the Vatican but it has largely been abandoned in the Catholic Church.

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I am not sure, however, whether Dulles—conservative as he is in Catholic terms—is willing to acknowledge his affinity with liberalism. It is an affinity that is, of course, absent from Pinnock.

The issue can be viewed as an hermeneutical one. The question that is being asked is what the revelatory trajectory looks like as it moves from what God said in a given culture long ago to what he is now saying to our culture through the words and actions of that bygone age. Pinnock holds the original revelation to be absolute and binding; therefore the cognitive horizons and the epistemological considerations of each succeeding age must be determined by it. For him, it is the modern word that must be demythologized, not Scripture. For the liberal it is the epistemological limits of the modern person which establish what is to be believed in Scripture. The modern world and the experience of the interpreter are taken as normative and Scripture is fitted around this "given" as well as possible. Modern consciousness is authoritative and Scripture is demythologized or discarded.

Dulles, unlike the liberal, is looking for something that is authoritative, but like the liberal he assumes as an interpretive norm the faith experience of the people of God. True, this experience has to be interpreted and defined by the authoritative church but it is still *experience*. Under the notion of development it is seen as both the vehicle for and elongation of divine revelation. There is only one source of revelation, God himself, but this revelation flows down related channels. It flows into Scripture; it flows through the people of God; it flows down the magisterium. What Scripture says should therefore coincide with what the people experience and what the magisterium teaches. Hence Dulles rejoices to see that Pinnock does not disapprove too much of those evangelicals who urge us "to grasp the threefold cord of Scripture, rule of

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faith, and authority.”

What this understanding of tradition really does, however, is to force the vagaries of later religious experience back into Scripture on the grounds that what is experienced religiously later must have been implicit in Scripture in the first place! Because Mary is thought, many centuries later, to have been assumed into heaven, it is argued that such a belief must lie implicit in some of the texts relating to her! The concern to have religious authority is anti-liberal; to treat Scripture in this way is precisely what liberals always do. By type, Dulles is a liberal on this issue but by species he is a Catholic.

My conclusion therefore is that the structure and function of authority in Pinnock's thought and in Dulles' are as different as night and day. Pinnock believes in an authoritative Scripture that exclusively contains God's special revelation; Dulles does not. Dulles believes in the unfolding of revelation within the people of God; Pinnock does not. Pinnock and Dulles both want something that is authoritative and in this both are anti-liberal. And both employ tradition to secure the proper functioning of this authority. They do it so differently, however, that it would be true to say that in this Pinnock is not catholic. And on the matter of revelation, Dulles is not evangelical.

The longing for certainty, made all the more intense by our experience in a chaotic and bedlam world, has lured many a theological sailor to destruction. As long as we are dealing with human interpreters, there

***There will never be any absolute,
hermeneutical infallibility.
Not even in Rome.***

will never be any absolute, hermeneutical infallibility. Not even in Rome. There may be greater comfort in numbers but there might also be greater danger of theological defection in numbers, too. Ultimately, we are cast back onto God that in his goodness and by his grace he will lead us, despite our many prejudices and sins, into a sufficient understanding of his infallible Word. There are no other alternatives. It is the absence of alternatives that leaves the room we need to develop our daily trust in the God who, having given us his Son, will not withhold whatever else we need to be his faithful children.

INQUIRY

(Questions, proposals, discussions, and research reports on theological and biblical issues)

Jesus and the Historians: The Discussion Broadens

by Scot McKnight

A Future for the Historical Jesus: The Place of Jesus in Preaching and Theology

by Leander E. Keck (reprint ed. with Afterword, Fortress, 1981, 283 pp., \$10.95).

Jesus and the Constraints of History

by A. E. Harvey (Westminster, 1982, 184 pp., \$23.00).

New Approaches to Jesus and the Gospels: A Phenomenological and Exegetical Study of Synoptic Christology

by Royce G. Gruenler (Baker, 1982, 261 pp., \$13.95).

In the last three years, the historical Jesus debate has again surged to the fore in gospel studies. Ben F. Meyer, in *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979), an altogether neglected but highly valuable book, made the bold claim that the intentions of Jesus could be discerned by a critical appraisal of the synoptic gospels. His book has been followed (not necessarily in agreement) by the translation of Schillebeeckx's provocative volumes *Jesus* and *Christ* (Crossroad,

1979, 1980), J. D. G. Dunn's *Christology in the Making* (Westminster, 1980), John Riches' *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* (London: DLT, 1980) and a promised work by E. P. Sanders of McMaster University. Into this debate we now have new works by A. E. Harvey (Oxford) and Royce G. Gruenler (Gordon-Conwell). By examining these two works, with the reprint of Leander Keck's 1971 volume as our starting point, we can conveniently assess the paths taken in the last decade.

Although *A Future for the Historical Jesus* is called a "progress report" rather than a "finished product," Keck has not changed his views in the time between printings. Analyzing the interrelationships between "the historian's Jesus" and faith, the gospel, salvation and the character of God, Keck concludes that the historical Jesus (as reconstructed by critics) does have a role in preaching, both now and in the future. He debates Lessing, Kierkegaard, Bultmann, Jeremias, Ebeling and Fuchs and proposes "trust" as the crucial category because it is personal, social and experiential. He argues that Jesus, in preaching, must be presented as Question: by responding in trust, the hearer finds salvation (freedom from self, openness to the future and the establishment of a community). An understanding of Jesus will lead finally to an understanding of God because Jesus is the "Parable

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