

# SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

What the Bible Really Says

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**Baker Academic**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Academic  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-0-8010-3983-6

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*For my friends at North Toronto Corps,  
who taught me the infinite worth  
of Scripture, and where I first started  
asking questions about tradition.*



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## PREFACE

As I come to the conclusion of writing this book, I find myself enormously grateful for the many who have helped me, and continue to help me, to see the vibrancy of what has been given to the Church. “What do you have except that which you have received?” (1 Cor. 4:7 EH). In the context of this project, I especially am grateful for my husband Chris, who first challenged me to analyze what the Bible says about tradition—and whom I ignored until I had an inexplicably sleepless night when the question came back to haunt me. Thanks are also due to the kind invitation of Prof. Craig Evans, who hosted me when I delivered the Hayward Lectures at Acadia University in the fall of 2010, as well as for the forbearance and searching questions of those who attended these initial presentations, which formed the nucleus of this book. It is necessary also to mention the thought-provoking discussion that took place in the PCUSA Wee Kirk Conference near Pittsburgh, where I “tried out” these ideas in October 2010, and the keen interest of students who worked with me during my spring 2011 class on Scripture and Tradition at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. For several years, too, I have been spurred on by conversations on this and related topics with three more-advanced students who have been discussion partners with me since their graduation from PTS—Matthew Bell, Timothy Becker, and Lisa Renée Sayre.

During the process of transformation from presentations to book, I have found invaluable the illuminating comments and gracious

suggestions of the Rev. Dr. John Breck, whose own work on Scripture and Tradition has been instructive to me (as to many others). I hope that my volume will be accessible to the nonspecialist who is interested in tradition—and this is a pressing concern to many in the Church—without boring those for whom the topic is not new. My assistant, Kathy Anderson, read all of this manuscript and was invaluable in clarifying the prose and cleaning it up prior to its submission—no, Virginia, there were no ancient manuscripts found *in* the Dead Sea! Further infelicitous details were discovered and suggestions made by Alan J. Kirk, my meticulous colleague in New Testament; Fr. Sean Taylor, my doughty comrade; and Bessie F. McEwan, my ever-perceptive mother. Thanks also for the labor of friends at Baker Academic, who partner with Acadia University in this series, and have done further necessary work to bring all this to fruition. As January draws to a close, I anticipate the Feast of the Presentation (Visitation) at the Temple, and recall the wonder I experienced three years ago when I first clearly envisioned holy Mary as the one who presented herself to the Lord, and who offers the living Word to us, as she did to Symeon: “Christ the coal of fire, whom holy Isaiah foresaw, now rests in the arms of the Theotokos as in a pair of tongs, and He is given to the elder” (Small Vespers); “Mary, you are the mystic Tongues, who has conceived in your womb Christ the live Coal” (Matins, Canticle 9).

Eve of the Feast of the Presentation 2012



# INTRODUCTION

## The Trouble with Tradition

Many people today have a love/hate relationship with tradition. Young people especially have gone beyond the twentieth-century love affair with all things “modern” and are beginning to feel wistful about lost family histories, forgotten ages, and remote times. In a rootless world, where millions live thousands of miles away from the home of their ancestors, and others do not even know where their forbears lived, many are turning again to historical fiction, in film or book, or rediscovering a love of genealogy. Family crests are reappearing, and advertisements at Christmastime speak with sentimentality about passing on (or even “creating”) family traditions. But there remains a knee-jerk reaction, a disdain for what is old: without thinking, we often play off tradition against vibrant creativity. There are a few sayings about tradition (some of which may be seen as sign-offs in emails) that show our ambivalence:

- Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to that arrogant oligarchy [“elite rulers”] who merely happen to be walking around. (G. K. Chesterton)
- Tradition does not mean that the living are dead, it means that the dead are living. (Harold MacMillan)

- We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's dam is the history we make today. (Henry Ford)
- Tradition is an explanation for acting without thinking. (Gracie McGarvie)

Of course, debated matters are seldom simple. And so some have tried to explain the complexity of tradition and why we have opposing reactions to it. For example, we can distinguish between a healthy regard for the great people and the good things of our past, as contrasted with either an unthinking acceptance or a slavishness to all things antiquarian just because they are old. In making just such a distinction, the late Jaroslav Pelikan quipped: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."<sup>1</sup>

Even on a popular level, this tension for and against tradition is expressed. Ours is probably not the only family that was enchanted by the film adaptation of Scholem Aleichem's stories about Tevye and his daughters. (However, with three surprisingly different daughters, yet all of a romantic bent, perhaps the Humphrey household was particularly predisposed to a fixation upon the *Fiddler on the Roof*.)<sup>2</sup> In monologue and song, the engaging Tevye immortalizes the turmoil that can rage, even internally, within one person, as he or she tries to make important distinctions regarding received ways of living and thinking. Which are traditions that can be released, and which is *the* tradition, the internal DNA that makes up who we are, and without which we would be lost?

A fiddler on the roof. Sounds crazy, no? But here, in our little village of Anatevka, you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. It isn't easy. You may ask "Why do we stay up there if it's so dangerous?" Well, we stay because Anatevka is our home. And how do we keep

1. Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*, 65.

2. It is a testimony to the depth of this popular musical that the mere mention of the word "tradition" evokes it in the contemporary imagination. Pelikan, on page 3 of *The Vindication of Tradition*, reminds us that for director Jerome Robbins, the development of the theme was key to the entire story: "If it's a show about tradition and its dissolution, then the audience should be told what that tradition is."

our balance? That I can tell you in one word: tradition! . . . Traditions, traditions. Without our traditions our lives would be as shaky as, as . . . as a fiddler on the roof!<sup>3</sup>

Tevye is by nature a traditionalist, but he is forced to weigh matters as his customary life crumbles around him. The tradition of using a matchmaker to arrange marriages for his daughters is something that he can learn to forgo, though with reluctance. But traditional Judaism is a different matter: it is his true home, more solid even than the little town Anatevka that he will be forced to leave. Asked to accept his youngest daughter's marriage to a gentile, he exclaims, in torment: "If I try to bend that far, I will break!"

### *Tradition as a Pair of Glasses*

No doubt some of us who consider these matters are, like Tevye, conservative in temperament—determined in this day of pell-mell change to conserve the treasures of the past. But even those of us who are oriented more toward the future need to understand the power and the meaning of tradition. Christians, by nature, with legitimacy can play it both ways—for we lay hold to a holy past but also look forward to God's promised future. We retain the Old Testament while living within the New Covenant forged by the Triune God. God's mercies are "new every morning" (Lam. 3:23). However, to stress the future at the expense of the past would be to lose what makes up our faith. As Jaroslav Pelikan so cogently argues in his own lecture, published as *The Vindication of Tradition*, even those who yearn for the disintegration of a certain tradition need to understand that tradition:

[A] young audience should be told what that tradition is as a part of the record of its dissolution. For even if—or especially if—the tradition of our past is a burden that the next generation must finally drop, it will not be able to drop it, or to understand why it must drop it, unless it has some sense of what its content is and of how and why it has persisted for so long. The tradition does not have to be understood to

3. This quotation, taken from the opening and closing lines of Tevye's first appearance in the film, may be seen in the online collection of quotables at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0067093/quotes>. Accessed January 2012.

be dominant. . . . In fact, so long as the tradition is not understood, some parts of it, however transmuted they may be, can continue to be dominant.<sup>4</sup>

Pelikan's words, of course, are directed toward tradition in general and disclose to us why the "classics" of any culture need to be known and understood, even when (or perhaps *especially* when) a community is in the midst of upheaval and change. Those yearning for reform may not see that unacknowledged traditions stand at the foundation of what they are trying to reform—for good or for ill. Pelikan speaks about the recapturing of tradition as an exercise in "supplying the quotation marks."<sup>5</sup> My own generation of baby boomers and those that followed seem to be, by and large, unaware of the wide-scale amnesia that has taken hold—forgetfulness of the literary classics that have shaped our culture, near oblivion concerning moral and philosophical foundations, a casual ignorance concerning the sacred texts. Nearly twenty years ago, when I instructed Bible at the undergraduate level in Montreal, the McGill Religious Studies Department offered a biblical literacy course that was keenly sought out not only by humanities students but also by those pursuing music, law, and even science degrees. The literary buffs among the student body lamented that, though we could offer them remedial help (supply the quotation marks) so that they could recognize allusions to the Bible as they studied their texts, they would never have the "Aha!" experience common to those for whom the Bible was part of the air that they breathed. The crash course we offered them was helpful (symbolism, major characters of the Bible, historical timelines), but it was more like explaining a joke—intimate familiarity with a tradition is necessary for an immediate and deep appreciation of a work of art that is in continuity with, or even in reaction to, that tradition. Students of the 1980s and 1990s had been robbed of this past, and so of the pleasant experience of discovery and immediate recognition. The situation is even worse today. Many do not even know that they do not know.

Every year that I teach "Introduction to the New Testament" at seminary, I seek to demonstrate to candidates for ministry the extent

4. Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*, 19.

5. *Ibid.*, 4.

of this forgetfulness, for this malady has infected even those who seek leadership in the churches. I tell them the story of the 1940 battle at Dunkirk, when the allies were attempting to halt the German movement into France, and the British Expeditionary Force found itself trapped in a pincer movement, eventually completely isolated on the beaches of this French town. Waiting in what they assumed was the calm before the storm, the commander of the force sent a simple three-word message back to the home office—“But if not.” At this point in telling the story, I pause and look expectantly at the incoming class. “So?” I ask. “What would this message have meant to you, had you received it?” Usually I am confronted by a sea of puzzled faces. Only twice in nine years has some keen student racked his or her brain and emerged with something like—“Oh, of course! He was referring to Daniel and the three young men who were facing the fiery furnace. Daniel defied the king, saying that the true God of Israel could deliver them, *but if not* they refused to worship the Babylonian idol, anyway” (cf. Dan. 3:17–18). My Masters students with religious backgrounds may be puzzled, and the two students who “got it” might be considered prodigies of Scripture by their peers; but seventy years ago, the entire British nation heard these words with appreciation. The three-word message galvanized citizens to launch across the channel every tug, every fishing boat, every craft that could float, and by means of “Operation Dynamo” not only the BEF was rescued but other allies as well, about a third of a million men. In 1940, the British people had a common heritage of the Scriptures, a shared tradition that was not simply cognitively understood but also effective and energizing.

To be a community means to have received and to retain a complex tradition that gives a common mind and a coherent life. To be a Christian means to have received and to retain, with gratitude, certain truths about God as revealed to us in the past; it means to have received life and to live in a certain way, following in the steps of the One who is the Christ. It also means to pass on what we have received to others, because there is and *so that* there is an intimate connection, a *koinōnia* between brothers and sisters past, present, and future. In speaking of this phenomenon, Pelikan calls helpful attention to the surprising wisdom of Edmund Burke, who

spoke about a “partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”<sup>6</sup> If a partnership across the ages was seen as a necessary condition by Burke, that social philosopher and activist who put mere property at the base of human community, how much more should we, as Christians, lay claim to such a dynamic?

Yet there remains a dilemma. With various degrees of discomfort, most Christians of the twenty-first century acknowledge that there is a marked theological and even ethical dissonance among those who call upon Christ. Frequently we disagree regarding what actually *constitutes* the Christian partnership or family—what *is* the Church, and what is its make-up? More than that, we have dissonant views concerning our received and transmitted faith (what we believe) and trace in different contours the shape of the life that we share (how we should live). With such diverse formal, conceptual, and practical perspectives, how can Christians of different formations reason together about tradition? Now, it is true that a search for “the lowest common denominator” probably cannot provide an adequate basis for authentic and reliable unity. (Witness the difficulties now being experienced by the United Church of Canada, which began as a compromise between doctrinally diverse Methodist, Reformed, and Congregationalist communities. Or consider the merger of more alike, yet still diverse, Reformed churches that made up the Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], whose continuing unity now seems precarious as various congregations and presbyteries are in serious disagreement.) However, a common denominator can provide us with a starting point for this difficult discussion, across Christian traditions, on tradition.

Virtually all Christians recognize a specific authority from their shared past—the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (though the boundaries of the older testament are variously marked by different Christian groups). Since Christians typically meet together to worship and live, rather than practicing individualistically, they also cleave to various traditions, or customs, around which they meet and agree—ways of stating what they believe, ways of praying, ways of worshipping together, ways of living. In some Christian groups, these

6. *Ibid.*, 20.

traditions are clearly described and outwardly acknowledged; in such cases, tradition (often spelled with a capital *T*, Tradition) forms part of their faith and is spoken about as instrumental in the makeup of the Church. For others, certain practices and beliefs are simply followed, without a great deal of attention being given to how these customary ways have come about. They are like the spectacles by which a certain group of Christians sees the world or even reads the Bible: some groups pay attention to the spectacles, and others hardly notice that they are wearing them. So, then, a conversation and debate about tradition may begin well by giving due weight to the scriptural witness, but even this is not as straightforward as it may seem to some. At every turn, the Bible and tradition, or traditions, are intertwined.

Many evangelical Christians, for example, have a daily “quiet time” because that is how they were taught at home or what was recommended to them at the time of their conversion. This is, of course, an evangelical “tradition”—something expected of faithful evangelicals as the best and most fruitful practice, though it does not find its way into statements of faith or promises made at the time of inclusion in the community. At the same time, there are also historical traditions to which Christian groups or denominations deliberately look back in times of uncertainty. Such respect for family ways is found even among Christians whose worship community emphasizes the principle of *sola Scriptura* (the Bible alone), those who might be skeptical of extrabiblical tradition as a formal value. (It might be helpful to pause here, however, and notice, with the help of Pelikan, that this is, paradoxically, a “full-blown tradition” of “antitraditionalism,”<sup>7</sup> and that this antitraditional mind-set is in some cases unconscious and received rather than adopted with understanding.)

Despite the general principle of “Scripture alone,” we see frequently in our era of denominational upset and confusion that more and more Protestant leaders are advocating a return to roots. And so in many quarters we notice a careful and deliberate quest to understand the beginnings of their own denomination, whether in the sixteenth, nineteenth, or even early twentieth century. When disagreeing about church polity, Presbyterian or Christian Reformed leaders will stress

7. *Ibid.*, 11.

the “Reformed” way of organizing their church. When worried about a decreased fervency among the people, Methodists will stress the “piety” enjoined by the Wesley brothers. In response to violence and debate concerning current involvement in Middle Eastern conflict, North American Mennonites emphasize their pacifist tradition. When in conflict over doctrine, Anabaptist thinkers will remind those in their care that no Christian is bound by any particular creed or confession but should read the Bible for himself or herself (ironically, a *traditional* Baptist position).

In practice, of course, these lines of denominational or confessional thinking become tangled because we live cheek by jowl with each other, visit each other’s worship communities, borrow each other’s music, read each other’s books, and are influenced by each other. I remember well an incident from over ten years ago, when my oldest daughter, then a young teen, was sitting in her first class at a French Roman Catholic school in Québec. One of the Sisters of Mercy who administered and taught at the school invited students to raise hands if they wanted the rite of *réconciliation* with the visiting priest—confession and absolution, she meant. My daughter, ever intrigued by something she hadn’t experienced, raised her naive Anglican hand, only to hear a helpful hiss behind her back. The young lady behind her whispered: “*Tu n’es pas obligée!* You don’t have to. You’re not Catholic.” To which my daughter, thinking quickly, responded: “It’s okay. There’s nothing in the Bible against confession! And I *am* catholic, just not Roman Catholic!” Her homeroom teacher was so amused that she related what had happened to me at the parent-teacher interview, saying that she had never heard a Protestant defend the practice of confession to a Catholic—and on the basis of the Bible! I decided not to argue with her that we were also “catholic” because we respected the whole Church, past and present, and were not sectarians. Nor did I tell her the story my daughter had related, of when she heard one of the girls complaining that she did not want to go to confession. The nun’s only response had been: “Too bad. It’s just something one does, my dear!” My daughter had not been impressed. Surely there was a better reason.

These little vignettes illustrate various attitudes toward a traditional practice. For some of the girls, the tradition of confession was



an obligation, something that they did not question but performed because they were Catholic. But the Catholic girl who balked at the confessional is not alone: I have heard other contemporary Catholics express uncertainty concerning its necessity or helpfulness, as they gesture toward the many changes since Vatican II and comment on how difficult it is for a layperson to determine what persists in the Tradition by its nature and what can change. For my daughter, confession was something relatively unknown, a religious practice to be weighed by the Bible and that should, if valid, be defensible by giving reasons. Of course, the Sister may well have suspected that her reluctant Catholic student was simply being awkward and that she was well aware of why a Catholic goes to confession—rather like a mother who is insisting to her three-year-old that she must eat peas when the little nipper is asking, yet again, “Why-y-y, mommy?” And, like the mother of the three-year-old, the Sister perhaps hoped that the girls who met with the priest for prayer that day would discover the “why” in the experience.

### *Where Does Tradition Fit?*

How *are* Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience related? This actually is a huge question among theologians today, who disagree with each other even within denominational boundaries. It has been customary to distinguish between typical Protestants, classical Anglicans, and Roman Catholics concerning how they weigh these things. This is the usual description: Protestants hold to *sola Scriptura*, the Scriptures alone as the rule of faith and practice; Anglicans believe in Scripture, while also honoring the place of tradition and reason in making hard decisions; and Roman Catholics have two authorities, Scripture and Tradition, with Tradition being expressed by the councils and by the pope.

This is, of course, far too simple a set of pictures. Among Protestants, for example, there has always been a debate as to whether the Bible has a restrictive or a “veto” function. That is, should we only do and believe what is explicitly directed in Scripture, or should we be free to do and believe things so long as they are not forbidden or denied in Scripture? Considering this argument, we may go back to the

famous disagreements between Luther and Carlstadt in the sixteenth century and to Luther's poignant question, "Where is it forbidden?" concerning the elevation of the bread in the Eucharist. Moreover, the proliferation of confessions or doctrinal statements that were framed in order to consolidate various Protestant positions has made it clear that in practical terms *sola Scriptura* amounts to *prima Scriptura* ("Scripture in first place").

For example, even Harold O. J. Brown, who often has been characterized (caricatured?) as unbending in his particular Protestant views, speaks about how tradition is a necessary part of the Christian life (personal and corporate) but insists, as well, that tradition should be treated with care. Scriptures ought not be opposed to tradition, he suggests, but should be understood as the *norma normans*—the standard that brings everything else into line. Without tradition, however, he says that worship, fellowship, community, and life would prove difficult to maintain, though "salvation" may be established through the Bible alone. In his understanding, tradition is the outward part of the Christian life, akin to drinking vessels, clothing, and the matrix in which we live.<sup>8</sup> Though some would find such a dualism (salvation versus Church, inside versus outside) problematic,<sup>9</sup> Brown's words serve to show that even in Protestant circles tradition is gaining more respectability. There remain, of course, Protestant groups that are more intransigent—or, we might say, more consistent—so that they continue to resist the development of even confessional statements to guide their group's interpretation of the faith. But even here the very stance of *sola Scriptura* is guarded, paradoxically, as a treasure—a *tradition* to safeguard the liberty of the Christian.

We find, then, a variety of approaches to the relationship between Scripture and tradition in Protestant circles. This relationship is at times carefully parsed (as with Brown or the newer movement that has endorsed "A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future"<sup>10</sup>) but at other times simply intuited. When we move over to the Roman Catholic communion, we find (as we might expect) that these matters have

8. Harold O. J. Brown, "Proclamation and Preservation," esp. 73 and 84.

9. Some of these are clarified in Melton, "A Response to Harold O. J. Brown."

10. This movement was initiated by Robert E. Webber and continues beyond his death. Its website may be found at <http://www.aefcall.org>.

been more formally and judiciously considered. Indeed, Catholic theologians have spoken about the relationship between Tradition and Scripture in various and complex ways. (In speaking of Catholicism in its own terms, we must write Tradition with a capital *T*, since this is how that faith community distinguishes between Holy Tradition, which remains constant, and human or pragmatic traditions that are mutable.) In Catholic discussion, some seem to depict Tradition and Scripture as two parallel authorities; in other accounts, the Scripture is described as sufficient but requiring interpretation by means of Tradition; others portray Scripture as the written part of the apostolic Tradition. The influential and recently beatified Henry Newman described Tradition in terms of its “vigorous, energetic, persuasive, progressive”<sup>11</sup> qualities. Indeed, Newman considered the very development of Tradition to be that characteristic that demonstrates the Church to be “incorrigible,”<sup>12</sup> unshakable—an ecclesial unsinkable Molly Brown. In this light, he set forth the development of Catholic doctrine, including those dogmas that have disturbed Protestant sensibilities, in terms of a “sustained and steady march from implicit belief to formal statement,”<sup>13</sup> catalyzed in part out of reaction to various disturbances and heresies in the history of the Church.

In thinking about different Catholic articulations of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, we are helped by the analysis of Richard Bauckham, who distinguishes three views: coincidence (Scripture and Tradition coincide); supplementation (Tradition supplements Scripture); and unfolding (Newman’s view that Tradition is the unfolding of Scripture, and of Tradition itself at an earlier stage). These three views, even that of supplementation, are to be distinguished not only from the radical Protestant stance of *sola Scriptura* but also over against a more moderate Protestant view that admits tradition as an aid to explaining or applying Scripture, which Bauckham dubs the “ancillary view.”<sup>14</sup>

Anglicans, with their “middle position,” and their respect for the ancient creeds, have seemed to “split the difference” between the

11. Newman, *The Development of Christian Doctrine*, 438.

12. *Ibid.*, 444.

13. *Ibid.*, 439.

14. Bauckham, “Tradition in Relation to Scripture and Reason,” 118.

Protestants and Catholics. They have also talked about the importance of the human reason in remaining faithful to Scripture and tradition (or Tradition, if we are listening to Anglo-Catholics). The great theologian Richard Hooker (1554–1600) is said to have invented the “three-legged stool” approach, and many claim this as the special Anglican way. By this, not a few Anglicans mean that Hooker established three authorities for Christians in the making of decisions—Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. This is misleading. Hooker was reacting to the Puritans of his day, who were refusing to allow certain practices in the church because they were not explicitly commanded in Scripture. Sing only Psalms, nothing else; don’t have an order of bishops, priests, and deacons, because this isn’t found clearly in Scripture; don’t put candles on the altar. Again, Hooker was concerned for the anarchy that could set in once knee-jerk reaction replaced reason and the traditions of the whole Church were forgotten. Every Protestant might well become his or her own little pope—all the wisdom of past Christian ages could easily be forgotten!

This is the same quandary in which we see our friends the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who say that the word “Trinity” isn’t found in Scripture, so it is unbiblical. What Hooker taught was *not* that we have three *separate* authorities to which we can go to understand what to believe and how to act. He taught, rather, that Scripture was to be understood within the context of tradition—especially the creeds and councils of the undivided Church—and by the light of God-given, redeemed reason. Scripture was not to vie for place with tradition and reason as though these were three separate voices. Instead, reason and tradition were aids in understanding the Scriptures. And reason was to be used when the Church gathered together to worship, both in times of corporate prayer and during the hearing and interpretation of the Word of God. Of course, this is the very procedure recommended by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 14: “If you bless with the spirit, how can any one in the position of an outsider say the ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?” (14:16); “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said” (14:29).

So Anglicans, though seeking a mediating way, also quarrel. Do Scripture, tradition, and reason stand on level ground like a “three-legged stool,” or is the better image that of a tricycle, with Scripture

as the main wheel and reason and tradition following behind to keep the reading on track? (I am, myself, allergic to three-legged stools, ever since I tipped off one of these onto a concrete landing while painting a window, with the result of a concussion and a night spent in the hospital!) Nor are such questions merely academic. The model that one uses matters. Some Anglicans use the criterion “what is reasonable” to interrogate those parts of the Scriptures that are uncomfortable to our generation, whereas others will only allow tradition to perform as a guide where Scripture is silent. I suppose that historically Anglicans have adopted what could be called a *prima Scriptura* position. However, while working toward Church unity in mission situations, they have commended other Christian elements besides the Bible: Christians should respect not only Scripture but also the creeds, the sacraments (with words and elements used by Jesus), and the historic episcopate.<sup>15</sup>

As we move into more recent denominational discussion, we come face-to-face with an influential position from Methodism (specifically, from a twentieth-century theologian named Albert C. Outler). Many contemporary theologians, not simply Methodists, have adopted his idea of the (so-called) “Wesleyan Quadrilateral”: the quartet of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Thinking that they are following Outler’s lead, and indeed also wrongly appealing to the eighteenth-century theologian and evangelist John Wesley (who would not have put these four things on an equal footing), they see these as equally valid foundations for personal and Church decision making. Wesley was certainly concerned in his day that Christians be more than simply formally “orthodox” in their beliefs. He yearned for every Christian by name to have a living experience of the Lord. As Outler rightly describes Wesley’s practical theology, he was an “evangelical catholic” who displayed “a theological fusion of faith and works, Scripture and tradition, revelation and reason, God’s sovereignty and human freedom” in which “the initiative is with God, the response is with man.”<sup>16</sup> In indicating what Methodists were to be taught, Wesley appealed first to Scripture but then also to tradition as a “competent, complementary witness” to the meaning of Scripture. He went on

15. I refer to the Chicago-Lambeth (1886) Quadrilateral, proposed both as a guide to Christian unity and as a minimal standard for Anglican identity.

16. Outler, *John Wesley*, iv.

to admit that Scripture and tradition required “the good offices . . . of critical reason,” and also to emphasize that “vital Christian experience . . . of the assurance of one’s sins forgiven . . . clinched the matter.”<sup>17</sup> Outler goes on to describe Wesley’s approach as a “complex method, with its fourfold reference.” Moreover, he notes that the method “preserves the primacy of Scripture, . . . profits from the wisdom of tradition, accepts the disciplines of critical reason,” and places the “stress on the Christian experience of grace.”<sup>18</sup>

Exaggerating Wesley’s emphasis on experience, some quadrilateralists since Outler have argued that experience was the *main* thing for Wesley and that he actually placed it alongside Scripture, tradition, and reason as an equal authority or as a criterion for making decisions. Like a literal quadrilateral, all four sides are deemed important: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Outler himself, who coined the phrase “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” later regretted it, since (in his own words) “it has been so widely misconstrued”<sup>19</sup> as an *empirical* means of *knowing* over against the way that Wesley talked about these four elements as instrumental in personalizing salvation. In this same reflective essay, written when he was nearing eighty in the mid-1980s, Outler lamented that there had even been, in the Methodist ranks, “a reduction of Christian authority to the dyad of ‘Scripture’ and ‘experience.’”<sup>20</sup> One wonders what Outler would have thought of the far more radical tendency seen in some quarters today, when revisionist theologians make the fourth member of the Quadrilateral, experience, the trump card or the arbiter in debated moral and theological issues. After all, what a solitary individual experiences is likely to remain unintelligible, unless interpreted by means of rational processes and within the context of communal wisdom (that is, tradition).

Unfortunately, while recognizing the fallout today, when experience frequently is being made to bear a burden for which it is unsuited, Outler never seems to have clarified whether all of the four are meant to function as both *sources* and also *authorities* in theological thinking. There is no reason to debate the fact that each of us, and all of

17. Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley,” see esp. 9.

18. *Ibid.*, 10.

19. *Ibid.*, 16.

20. *Ibid.*, 17.

us as members of a faith community, have recourse to our experiences, to the operation of reasonable thinking and discourse, to past traditions (corporate experience?), and to Scripture, and that these may be roughly designated “sources” for theologizing or for making ethical or ecclesial decisions. However, it is another matter to assume that this makes experience and reason “authorities” in the same sense that the Church has recognized Scripture and, in many cases, Holy Tradition or even specific traditions. (In the following chapters, I will use the lower case “tradition” to refer to the concept in general and when speaking about Protestant discussions of tradition, while reserving the capitalized “Tradition” for what appears to be normative and binding Tradition in Catholic, Orthodox, or Anglo-Catholic contexts. I will also use “tradition” and “traditions” when referring to practices or ideas that may be ancient but are not clearly a part of Holy Tradition from the perspective of those communities that honor those things formally passed on as authoritative.)

However, Outler does not discern the difference in the way that experience and reason actually operate, as compared with Scripture and Tradition (or tradition). It might have been helpful had he noted that the first pair (experience and reason) are *tools* or *means* by which we hear, understand, organize, appropriate, and apply the corpus of Scripture and the deposit of Tradition found in creed, hymnody, liturgy, the meditations of the Church fathers, and the like. (We should, of course, recognize that in the Scriptures themselves, as in past tradition, we may see the exercise of reason and some appeals to experience, especially communal experience. But these are not presented as authorities in and of themselves; rather, they are means by which we recognize what is authoritative.) Scripture and Tradition, then, are gifts that the Church has received, though their precise contours have been and continue to be argued; reason and experience are general human actions or encounters *by which* we understand. Moreover, Outler does not give any clear indication as to how we should arbitrate between criteria when Scripture, tradition, reason, and (personal) experience seemingly collide. Instead, in his attempt to control the damage caused by the term “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” he waxes rhapsodic, taking refuge in attractive rhetoric concerning how we ought to be “immersed” in Scripture, “truly respectful” of the past, “honestly

open to . . . critical reason,” and “eagerly alert to the fire and flame of grace” (i.e., our personal experience). As Methodist scholar William Abraham ruefully remarks, this kind of “superb rhetorical flourish”<sup>21</sup> does not rescue the Quadrilateral from its inherent instability.

Despite Outler’s caveat, the radical left continues to exploit the Quadrilateral. Abraham suggests that this is because the Quadrilateral represents a “hasty shotgun wedding” between unequal entities, “scripture and tradition on the one side and . . . reason and experience . . . on the other.”<sup>22</sup> The contemporary use of the Quadrilateral is far removed from Wesley’s practical theology and has become a method “for dilettantes.”<sup>23</sup> Outler’s schema is now employed “creatively” by those expressing their disagreement with other Christians who appeal to Scripture, or to Scripture and Tradition, as authoritative—“but what about reason and experience?” cry these progressive minds. The most natural move has been to exaggerate this challenge and to assume that if, by our own modern experience, we are better informed than a particular part of the ancient (and more naive) Scripture and body of tradition, then experience should act as the main authority, the trump card in the game of theology. How we begin and how we proceed in making decisions in the Church does affect outcome. Many of the contemporary “hot button” debates in the Church are fueled by fundamental differences concerning what constitutes reliable authority.

Amidst all these positions, there are other possible ways of relating Scripture to tradition, reason, and experience, as we can see in several academic volumes that bring together Christians from different backgrounds<sup>24</sup> to debate these matters. On the ground, of course, members of various Christian communities bring together these dynamics in various ways too, often without thinking very deeply about what they are doing. In a time when church bodies are not hermetically sealed tight one against each other, and when there is a great deal of “circulation of the saints”—Christians moving from church to

21. Abraham, “What’s Right and What’s Wrong with the Quadrilateral?” Professor Abraham provided me with a manuscript copy of this trenchant essay, which has appeared also in *Canadian Methodist Historical Society Papers*.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. See, for example, the essays in Bauckham and Drewery, *Scripture, Tradition and Reason*.



church, denomination to denomination—we can never assume that any one Christian holds the views historically associated with his or her church. I have met Roman Catholics who have never heard the phrase “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” but who justify abortion on the basis of reason and experience. I have met self-proclaimed *sola Scriptura* Protestants who believe unswervingly in a whole series of doctrines that cannot be found in the Bible—for example, scenarios cooked up by sensationalists who give predictive details concerning the end of the world, despite Jesus’ warnings that we can’t know such things.

### My Quest (Learning from History and Context)

The confusion in all this was brought forcibly to bear upon me as I made my own Christian pilgrimage during my teens and twenties. My own childhood formation was in the Salvation Army, a movement to which I owe a great deal. The Army has as its first doctrine, “We believe that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament were given by God, and that they only constitute the divine rule of Christian faith and practice.” As a child, I memorized twelve doctrines (each doctrine memorized being rewarded with a quarter!) along with the names of the books of the Bible. We were catechized in “Junior Soldiers’ class” as children and in “Corps Cadets” as youth. (We were not taught to recite the Apostle’s Creed, though it is printed in the back of the official *Handbook of Doctrine*, a move that positions the Army within the broader context of apostolic and catholic theology.)

What worried me, as I grew older, was that the Salvation Army persisted (and persists) in its tradition of not practicing the sacraments, despite the clear words of Jesus at the end of Matthew’s Gospel (regarding baptism) and the teachings in the Gospels, Acts, and Paul (regarding the Lord’s Supper). I heard entire sermons on the “Great Commission” (Jesus’ closing instructions in Matthew’s Gospel to his disciples to go into the world) that ignored the elephant in the room: here Jesus *commands* baptism as part of the apostolic mission. I was even more puzzled in Salvation Army meetings at the hearty singing of that gospel song “I’ve been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb,” with its second verse: “And that’s not all, there’s more besides: I’ve been

to the river and I've been baptized." "No you haven't!" I remember inwardly commenting. My young adulthood in the Salvation Army was a potent training ground not only for faithfulness, nor only for creating a disciplined desire to serve others, but also for the asking of hard questions about the nature of the Church and the place of tradition in Protestant churches. I became determined to take a look at the spectacles that were helping me to see and discovered that these were also blocking my vision. Eventually this quest led me to part ways with the Salvation Army (in terms of membership); yet I remain grateful for everything that I learned and for continued friendships there.

Like it or not, traditions and traditional ways of reading the Bible have brought Christians into strong disagreement and have been the catalyst for Church splits or impediments to reunion. At one point early in its history, the Salvation Army itself was asked to merge with the Anglican Communion and refused to do so because of the Army's commitment to the newly established tradition of female ministry and because of its stand regarding the sacraments. (To compensate, Anglicans copied the movement, and created the "Church Army.") Anglicans, keen on denominational reconciliation, proposed in the nineteenth century four ways of practicing Christianity called the "Lambeth Quadrilateral" (not to be confused with the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral"). These four principles were meant to be a kind of "lowest common denominator," something that could gather Christians of various backgrounds together. Even though they were very general, the four principles are not uniformly acceptable to all Christians. The problem? Tradition! One of the four principles is that the historic creeds truly describe the beliefs of Christians, but to recognize the creeds as authorities would be problematic for anyone who believes that he or she is committed only to the Bible and nothing else. Another of the principles the Lambeth Quadrilateral affirms is the importance of "historic episcopate" (the ongoing importance of bishops who have been consecrated by other bishops) as a basis for Church order. But there are Christians who do not consider the role of bishop (or priest or deacon) to be a biblical or necessary feature of the Church. So then, even the Anglicans, who consider their church as a kind of "bridge" between Protestants and Catholics, have not

discovered how to help Christians agree about the place of tradition. Tradition and how we see things stand in the way.

Tradition also has played a big part in the actual separation of ways among Christians and Christian bodies. Wesley and his friend Whitefield, evangelists together in England, parted company over traditions of reading the Scriptures: Did the Bible promote the doctrine of “free will” (Wesley) or “election” (Whitefield)? Of course, one of the major reasons for the Reformation and the “protest” of that time was that the Reformers refused to accept particular traditions of the Church such as the selling of indulgences and masses for the dead. Their rejection actually went beyond a reaction to specific doctrines and practices to become a denial of the formal position that the medieval Catholic Church gave Tradition—as something alongside Scripture to be obeyed and honored. Yet the Reformers came to have their own ways of respecting the past and of passing this on. Both Calvinists and Roman Catholics continue to look back to the tradition that came from the ancient and blessed theologian Augustine of Hippo: Calvinists, however, discern in Augustine’s writings the doctrine of election, whereas Roman Catholics stress other elements of his thought.

Going back even farther in time, we must remember the earliest major schism of the Church. The formal division between Eastern and Western Christianity threatened as early as the ninth century was total in the eleventh century and had several causes. A major reason for the break was, again, tradition and the question of who guards Holy Tradition. Could a universally accepted creed be changed after the fact by one section of the Church? And what authority does the Roman Patriarch, the pope, have in relation to the leaders of other esteemed historic churches? In all these debates, from the ninth through to the twentieth centuries, theologians, as well as “ordinary” Christians, have of course gone back to the Bible: but they read the Bible from particular perspectives, from within a tradition, acknowledged or assumed.

## Beginning the Discussion

Since the turn of the millennium, we have heard more and more about the importance of tradition, ranging from doctrinally conservative

individuals such as those responding to “A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future,” to the provocative work of David Brown concerning *Tradition and Imagination*. The Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future advocates that evangelicals “turn away from methods that separate theological reflection from the common traditions of the Church” and that they honor “the hermeneutical value of the Church’s ecumenical creeds.”<sup>25</sup> The challenge coming from David Brown’s powerful work is more controversial. With William Abraham, I am pleased to see Brown’s emphasis on the soteriological purpose of the Scriptures. However, I worry about the very broad strokes with which Brown paints tradition as God’s “continuing revelation,” so that he even commends us to move outside of Christianity (to the Qur’an, for example) in order to enrich our theological understanding and in order to reconfigure the problems of the twenty-first century.<sup>26</sup> Such proposals certainly indicate that tradition is getting better press today. But how do we, as Christians from different traditions, think carefully through these matters so that we may come to an understanding of traditions and Holy Tradition that goes beyond mere cherry-picking of those parts of the past that we happen to appreciate, or that is so broad an extension of the idea of tradition that we are set adrift in a sea of non-Christian historical practices and ideas?

There are many interrelated questions that will be exposed as Christians do their work together to come to terms with the value and place of tradition (and Tradition). Such an investigation will recognize that the word “tradition” is in some cases an abstract noun indicating beliefs, practices, and dispositions that have come to Christians from the past, while for the ancient Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglo-Catholic communities, there are also established

25. “A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future,” available at <http://www.aefcenter.org/read.html>.

26. David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 167. This very brief comment does not do justice to the depth and care of Brown’s study, which deserves a reading even if readers find themselves unable to follow at some points. An in-depth analysis of Brown’s argument in this book, including a consideration of his fundamental assumptions, has been penned by William J. Abraham, “Scripture, Tradition, and Revelation: An Appreciative Critique of David Brown.” Prof. Abraham was kind enough to forward me a prepublication copy of this paper, presented at St. Andrews University, Scotland, in September 2010.

traditions that form part of normative Holy Tradition, spelled with a capital *T*.

The very fact that such explanations are necessary should tip us off to the difficulty of talking about such matters across ecclesial lines. Indeed, we should not assume that this discussion will move Christians immediately to a deeper unity, but that there will be, in the first place, a further complication of matters, indeed, perhaps an increased tension. (I think of the first time that I became aware of the Roman Catholic understanding of the Eucharist, complete with its teaching concerning who can appropriately receive at the altar. For years I had naively received the host while at the summer cottage, thinking that I was doing my part as a Salvationist to express unity with other Christians. When I came to understand that in the Catholic context the reception of the elements implied unity with the pope and acceptance of all Catholic dogma, and that in fact the pope forbade such reception, I had a twofold response: first, I was happy to understand more about the Catholic Church and its ecclesiology; second, I was now in tension when I worshiped there, the only place in that small community. My response was similar to a student of mine who was enamored with all things Eastern Orthodox until he stumbled upon their concrete ecclesiology, their claim to be the apostolic Church.)

Similarly, as we open the door to frank and careful thinking about Tradition, complicating questions emerge. I immediately think of three:

- Can we separate Scriptures from tradition? (Not everyone would agree that we can. For example, Pelikan reminds us that in the Christian faith, tradition both preceded the writing of Scriptures and proceeded after they had been written.<sup>27</sup>)
- Is there a difference (and if so, what is it) between “traditions” and Holy Tradition? This typically has been answered in the affirmative by Catholics, Orthodox, and some Anglicans, but currently is being considered by those Protestants who are speaking

27. Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*, 9. Pelikan further remarks that Luther thought that Tertullian (end of the second century) was the first Church father, so that there was a chronological gap between the writing of the New Testament and the ancient theologians: this is manifestly untrue. There is no gap between “gospel” and “tradition,” at least chronologically.

with approval of “The Great Tradition.” (See the conclusion of this book.) But how do we make the distinction?

- What is the relationship between the Church, Scripture, and Tradition? This question, of course, reminds us that wherever we start in speaking about our faith, we are dealing with a kind of seamless robe. The debates that began in the Reformation have doubled back in our day, so that for many people ecclesiology is *the* main issue facing Christians today. Tradition is a key element in our understanding of the nature of the body of Christ.

It is not my aim to solve all these problems but to make a start using a kind of “common denominator” approach, something shared by Christians: What does the Bible *really* say about tradition? Our major business will be to compare Scripture with Scripture, with all the help that we can get from others in the Christian community, past and present, who have read with care these texts that touch on the nature of tradition.

We want, as much as we can, to hear and discern *all* of what the Bible *really* says about tradition by looking at many of the places where it is spoken about, positively and negatively, as an action and as a gift. Where our denominational spectacles have served to block this sight, I hope we (and I!) will have the grace to take them off and try another pair. I do not here style myself as an expert, thinking that I can solve these problems on my own. Rather, I will deliberately enlist the help of Christians from various communities, past and present, as they read the Bible, in an effort to read the Bible with the whole Church. In our investigation, we will begin first with parts of the Bible that use the Greek terms most frequently translated as “tradition” in our English Bibles, the words *paradosis* and *paradidōmi*, words that include the idea of “giving” or “gift.” As we begin the first chapter with a study of this word group, be prepared for a surprise: Has something been “lost in translation”? Chapter 1 will consider a host of scriptural passages that use the *paradidōmi* and *paradosis* word group, but will also touch on other places where the idea of tradition is evoked, but by means of other words.

In chapter 2, we will consider tradition in the transmission of the Bible (especially the Old Testament) and the teaching of the rabbis,

and then zero in on Jesus' condemnation of dead and deadly traditions in the Bible. Can we use the critique of the Law (or the rabbinic understanding of the Law) by Jesus and Paul as a straightforward commentary upon tradition? In this chapter we will consider the oral and written aspects of tradition, and try to discern what the New Testament means by a "dead letter" (2 Cor. 3) and a deadly tradition.

Chapter 3 looks carefully at teaching, practice, and worship in the New Testament and considers the apostolic deposit that forms its basis. In this chapter the decisions of the Church in Acts will provide a good model for the understanding of tradition, while the debates presided over by St. Paul in the Corinthians correspondence will show us the importance of tradition in his ministry. The dynamics that we see in chapter 3 will be amplified by the particular topic of chapter 4, originally delivered as a sermon at Acadia University, in which we will discuss God's "blessed delivery" to the Church. Attention to God's unusual means of delivery or transmission helps us to see the many nuances and lively quality of tradition and how it involves all members of the Church, not simply those in formal leadership positions.

Chapter 5 discloses how the Bible considers tradition to be God's personal gift to the Church, intimately connected with the giving of the Holy Spirit. Chapter 6 probes, by means of the Scripture itself, into the difference between Holy Tradition and human traditions, how we can discern the difference, and what our stance might be toward those "little traditions" that are not part of the immutable life of the Church but that also are not noxious to Christians.

Finally, in our conclusion, we will touch upon what contemporary Christian thinkers are calling "the Great Tradition": those continuing elements of the faith to which all Christians lay claim, including not only a body of belief but also ancient writings, morals, worship, and approach to life in general. We will revisit some of the early Church fathers and trace the method by which they approached the Scriptures—a method of reading the Old Testament that is in itself part of Tradition, developing before, within, and beyond the writing of the New Testament. Our concern in all this is to discover the stance of the biblical writings toward traditions and Tradition, and to see how the approaches of the biblical writers set a good course at

the establishment of Christ's Church—a course in which we should continue because we share in their life.

In this study, I speak as one who was nurtured in the Protestant tradition and who has moved into a catholic and historic understanding of the Church, coming by way of Anglicanism into the Eastern Orthodox Church. While engaging in this process, I have discovered that confusion about the role of tradition is found in many places among Christians, even among those communities that value it. And, as we have noted, we are seeing in our day renewed interest in tradition and, among Christians, a keen desire to understand what some are calling the Great Tradition. This is going on in places where we might not expect it—let us say, in “untraditional” places. A half a block from my house, there is an evangelical church that sports a signboard with changing words. Once it declared that “A Sunday with God is better than Dairy Queen!” Most recently, it has enticed readers in this way: “We are untraditional; Check us out!” Many Christians would now smile with me in seeing this kind of advertisement, for that tradition of antitraditionalism is being questioned, as is the idea of the Church as a smorgasbord intended to meet different tastes. It is my prayer that all of us who look to Jesus will come to see our faith as a continuous and growing thing, something bound up with a common life, belief, and practice, something intertwined with the Scriptures, something that connects all of us together. With the apostle I pray that, with the eyes of our heart enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which he has called us, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable grandeur of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his mighty energy (cf. Eph. 1:18–19).