

SHOULD BAPTISTS TAKE ANOTHER LOOK AT TRADITION?

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Historically, Baptists have forcefully proclaimed the sole and sufficient authority of the Scriptures for Christian belief and life. Robert G. Torbet wrote:¹

Baptists, to a greater degree than any other group, have strengthened the protest of evangelical Protestantism against traditionalism. This they have done by their constant witness to the supremacy of the Scriptures as the all-sufficient and sole norm for faith and practice in the Christian life.

More recently Millard J. Erickson expressed the Baptist view of tradition in these poignant terms:²

...the free churches ostensibly repudiate any use of tradition, eschewing it in favor of a total reliance upon Scripture... The President of a Baptist seminary once said with tongue in cheek: "We Baptists do not follow tradition. But we are bound by our historic Baptist position!"

In the present paper we shall raise for fresh consideration the question of the proper place of tradition in the faith of Baptists today.

Some recent developments make re-examination of this issue eminently appropriate. First, in the field of Reformation studies there has been the recent recognition of the significant role that many Protestant Reformers gave to tradition. This has resulted from an increasing effort to understand the sixteenth-century Reformation in the context of the late Middle Ages.³ Reformation historian Heiko A. Oberman has undertaken valuable studies of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in the conviction that "a definite and geographically extensive continuity exists between the Middle Ages and the sixteenth-century Reformation in the shape and context of the ongoing intellectual quest."⁴ One area of continuity relates to the whole matter of the role of tradition in theology.

Oberman has shown that in the late Middle Ages at least two differing views of tradition co-existed within the Catholic Church. One view, which he called Tradition II, exalted the unwritten teachings of the Apostles as promulgated by the Roman Catholic teaching office, giving them equal authority with Scripture. The other view, which he called Tradition I, saw the Scriptures as the only final authority for Christian faith, putting tradition in a subsidiary role as guide to the proper understanding of Scripture.⁵ Significant to this paper is the fact that recent studies are showing that many Protestant Reformers, notably Philip Melancthon (1497-1560), Martin Bucer (1491-1551), and Caspar Schwenckfeld (1490-1561), shared this

second mediaeval view of tradition as well.⁶ While for them Scripture was the supreme and only infallible guide for faith, tradition was deemed to have a “hermeneutical” authority in helping Christians to understand Scripture. “Sola Scriptura” did not eliminate a need for the illuminating ministry of the Spirit via the tradition of the Church. This new understanding of how the Reformers viewed tradition in relation to “sola Scriptura” demands careful reconsideration of our own view of tradition as fellow Protestants.

A second development which argues for the timeliness of this paper is the recent interest that Baptist theologians have been showing in the matter of the role of tradition for Baptists. In 1978 Bruce Demarest wrote on “The Contemporary Relevance of Christendom’s Creeds.” He concluded that they are very relevant indeed. While not possessing infallible authority, “the creeds constitute the precipitate of the religious consciousness of mighty men and times.” And so, “as formularies that record the central convictions of generations of early Christians, the creeds cannot be taken lightly.”⁷

More recently Clark Pinnock has discussed “How I Use Tradition in Doing Theology.” While carefully setting himself apart from the Catholics who “absolutize tradition,” Pinnock argued that in opposition to liberal novelties we must set forth “the old Christian way of thinking about God, Christ, the Bible, and so forth.” Tradition can provide “an interpretive guide and doctrinal safeguard.”⁸ Pinnock and Demarest have sounded notes not often heard in Baptist circles. They challenge us to ask afresh, what is the proper view of the relation between Scripture and tradition? Should we listen only to the voice of Scripture, or does tradition have a voice to be heeded as well?

The present paper furthers the work of Demarest and Pinnock by carefully exploring some of the main historical alternatives on the question of the role of tradition. We shall examine the views of Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330 - 379), Vincent of Lérins (d. 450), Melancthon, and the Anabaptist martyrology by Thieleman van Braght, *The Martyrs’ Mirror* (1660). Our purpose is to clarify the issues relating to the role of tradition by seeing them through the eyes of these great theologians from the past. We shall argue that Melancthon and *The Martyrs’ Mirror* represent positions that could fruitfully be adopted by Baptists today. In conclusion we shall note some practical implications that this position entails for contemporary Baptists.

1. Basil of Caesarea

Basil was a younger contemporary of Athanasius (ca. 295-373), the great champion of the Trinitarian faith and Nicene orthodoxy against the Arians. At a time when Christianity was being manipulated for political ends by Arian emperors, Basil joined Athanasius in the fight for truth. When Emperor Valens threatened Basil with impoverishment, exile, torture and death during “the darkest days of the Arian depression,” Basil was the leader of orthodoxy in the Eastern Church.⁹ In 374, one year after the death of

Athanasius, Basil wrote a treatise against the Pneumatomachoi ("Spirit-fighters"), those denying the divinity of the Holy Spirit. It was entitled *On the Holy Spirit*. In terms reminiscent of Athanasius' defence of the deity of Christ, Basil argued that to reject the divinity of the Holy Spirit was to reject his work of sanctification, and so to reject salvation itself.

When we speak of the plan of salvation for men, accomplished in God's goodness by our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who would deny that it was all made possible through the grace of the Spirit?¹⁰

The work of the Holy Spirit is thus inseparable from that of the Father and Son.

Important to this paper is the place given to Scripture and to tradition in the course of his argument. Basil's high regard for the infallible authority of Scripture is clear throughout. He quotes the Scriptures profusely, with often six to eight references on a single page in modern print. When defending the equal glory that the Son shared with the Father, Basil masterfully refers to the great Christological texts in the Psalms, John, Heb and Col. Yet, Basil sometimes buttresses his argument by the authority of tradition as well. In defending the customary liturgical phrase, "Glory to the Father with the Son, together with the Holy Spirit" Basil writes:¹¹

It is not true that the phrase, with the Son, is alien to the usage of the faithful. Everyone who steadfastly values the old ways above these novelties, and who has preserved unchanged the tradition of the Fathers ... is familiar with the phrase.

Significantly, Basil followed this with the following observation:¹²

We are not content simply because this is the tradition of the Fathers. What is important is that the Fathers followed the meaning of Scripture.

It would appear that for Basil the Fathers did not stand with Scripture as voices with independent authority.

However, at other times they clearly did. After spending eighty percent of the treatise primarily in setting down Scriptural arguments, Basil then concludes by appealing to "unwritten laws of the Church" and "well-known men in the church." Basil argues that he was justified in defending the divinity of the Holy Spirit from unwritten traditions "secretly" passed down, and that these "have equal force in true religion" with written sources (Scripture). These unwritten customs included such practices as praying while facing the east, standing for prayer on Sunday, baptism with three immersions, along with the renunciation of Satan and his angels, and the form of words to be used in the Lord's Supper. They also included teachings on the divinity of the Spirit. Why were some teachings in the Church kept

unwritten? Basil explains that:¹³

When the apostles and Fathers established ordinances for the Church they protected the dignity of the mysteries with silence and secrecy from the beginning... We have unwritten tradition so that the knowledge of dogma might not become neglected and scorned through familiarity.

It was especially felt necessary to guard these mysteries from the unbaptized.

Basil gives two reasons for following unwritten traditions. First, "it is in the Apostolic Spirit to follow unwritten traditions." Here he cites 1 Corinthians 11:2 and 2 Thessalonians 2:15. Second, "we are compelled to accept old teachings since their hoary antiquity inspires reverence"; we should honour "men who were pillars of the Church."¹⁴ To omit the unwritten traditions would "mutilate" the Gospel.¹⁵ In conclusion, we see that for Basil tradition could include "secret" revelation going beyond Scripture and that its voice had the same authority as Scripture. Tradition had a practical use in guiding Church practice, and defending Christian faith and life against heresy. It is tradition that is orthodox; heresy is always novel - a break with the tradition passed down from the apostles. This unwritten tradition, it should be noted, is always expressed in the universal voice of the Church, and is not merely the scattered teachings of individual fathers.

2. Vincent of Lérins

When we discuss the matter of Scripture and tradition in the Western mediaeval Catholic context, we must recognize that "Catholic theology itself has evolved in the matter of Scripture and Tradition," so that we find a "variety of theories." That is to say, prior to the sixteenth century there was, historically, no such thing as a uniform "Catholic view" on this issue. Indeed, George Tavard has stated that "there are more than two opinions about tradition among Catholic theologians today."¹⁶ We are thus examining Vincent of Lérins only in order to understand one distinctive view of tradition. The value of Vincent's view is that it provides a helpful contrast with the position of Basil less than 100 years before.

Vincent was a native of Gaul, modern day France. Little is known about him except for the few passing autobiographical remarks in his own treatise and the references to him by Gennadius of Marseilles (*fl.* 470) in 495.¹⁷ Vincent tells us the following about himself:¹⁸

Whereas I was at one time involved in the manifold and deplorable tempests of secular warfare, I have now at length, under Christ's auspices, cast anchor in the harbour of religion...I am [now] dwelling in the seclusion of a monastery situated in a remote country house where I can

follow without distraction the Psalmist's admonition, "Be still and know that I am God."

Vincent was part of a monastery on the island of Lérins, now called St. Honorat. The "monastery" probably consisted of an aggregate of independent dwellings, each called a "monasterium."¹⁹ Gennadius tells us that he died around 450. About 434 Vincent authored a Latin book entitled *Commonitorium*, which can be translated "A Reminder." The term refers to the ancient practice of giving a messenger a paper with instructions to assist his memory on details as he carried out his task.²⁰ Vincent wrote to provide *himself* with a reminder — a reminder of the great Christian truths "which our forefathers have handed down to us and committed to our keeping," truths he was tempted to forsake when so many heretics were abroad. His purpose was to provide a general guideline to help him know "how to distinguish truth from falsehood," so that "the rule of the Church's faith may be settled."²¹ The particular heresies that most concerned Vincent were those of the Donatists in ecclesiology, the Arians on the Trinity, and Apollinaris (ca. 310-ca. 390) and Nestorius (d. ca.451) on Christology, Nestorius having been condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431 just 3 years before. Further, Vincent seemed to be gently opposing the influence of Augustine (354-430), especially Augustine's views on predestination and tradition, the latter of which closely resemble the view of Basil.²² Vincent, therefore, thought it best to write under a pseudonym, Peregrius.

He wrote in simple, unpolished language, and with brevity. The *Commonitorium* is divided into two parts: the first part provides a "sure and universal rule" whereby one might "distinguish the truth of the Catholic faith from the falsehood of heretical depravity."²³ In the second part (which was stolen during Vincent's lifetime), he collected sentences of the fathers in order to settle certain doctrinal questions. After it was stolen Vincent provided only a brief summary of this second book.

Vincent's theme in the first book is especially relevant to this paper. There he states that to detect and avoid heresy we must "fortify our own belief in two ways; first by the authority of the Divine law [the Scriptures], and then by the tradition of the Catholic Church." At this point Vincent raises a question:²⁴

Since the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything,... what need is there to join with it the authority of the Church's interpretation?

Vincent replied that the heretics also appealed to Scripture in support of erroneous opinions and so there was need to establish a rule for the right use of Scripture. This rule was that we must interpret Scripture according to the three marks of the Catholic doctrinal tradition: universality, antiquity, and consent. That is, an *interpretation* of Scripture was correct if it was held by

all Christians throughout the world, if it agreed with the earliest views of the fathers, and if it was agreed on by “almost all priests and teachers.”²⁵ It is significant that Vincent believed that Scripture was “sufficient of itself for everything.” Unlike Basil, there was no appeal to “secret” traditions that stood on an equal footing with Scripture and which were necessary for the Christian life. All Christian faith and practice had to be rooted in the authority of Scripture. He affirmed unequivocally that the canon alone “suffices for every question.”²⁶

However, he also affirmed that in order to effectively silence heresy, there was need for a subsidiary authority in religion — “the authority of the Church’s interpretation” of Scripture. How did Vincent justify appeal to this subsidiary authority? He appealed to the ancient martyrs who had died not for “the vague and conflicting notions of one or two men” but for “the faith of universality and antiquity.”²⁷ Vincent also appealed to Paul’s example in 1 Tim 6:20, providing a word for word exposition of this passage. Like Timothy, Christians should “shun profane novelties,” and should “keep the deposit.” This “deposit” referred to matters “not for private adoption but of public tradition,” passed down by other Christian teachers.

Teach still the same truths which you have learned so that, though you speak after a new fashion, what you speak may not be new.²⁸

Finally, Vincent defended this three-fold test of right Scriptural interpretation by appeal to the practice of the recent Council of Ephesus. Those assembled to judge Nestorius did so by examining the sentiments of the fathers “in order that by their consentient determination the reverence due to ancient truth might be duly and solemnly confirmed, and the blasphemy of profane novelty condemned.”²⁹ In practice one determined the consentient voice of universality and antiquity either by reference to the four Ecumenical Councils that had settled basic questions in the past; or in the case of a new issue, by consulting the opinions of fathers who were “great” and “approved masters,” seeking to discern their common mind on the disputed point.³⁰

In conclusion, we see that Vincent indeed expressed a distinctive view of the relation between Scripture and tradition. He has carefully guarded the supreme and infallible authority of Scripture. He also gave to tradition a subsidiary voice of authority, whose role was to guard the interpretation of Scripture from novelty and error. Indeed for Vincent, tradition was “Scripture itself as the Church hands it down to successive generations.”³¹ Both the views of Basil and Vincent are unworkable. Basil’s category of “secret” traditions leaves a door open to all manner of spurious “traditions” being brought in. Vincent’s ideal, although preferable to Basil’s, suffers from a significant weakness. For it is evident that there was *not* always consensus among the early fathers on all issues, as Abelard boldly showed centuries later. And further, the determination of who were the “approved”

fathers is always liable to be arbitrary.

3. Philip Melanchthon

Philip Melanchthon, the withdrawn and studious Reformation theologian, always worked in the shadow of his famous colleague, Martin Luther (1483-1546). For this reason his chief modern biographer has called him "The Quiet Reformer."³² Yet his impact in the progress of sixteenth-century Reform was immense.

Melanchthon arrived at Wittenberg in 1518, at the age of 21, to teach Latin and Greek. By that time he had already obtained his M.A. and had published six books, including Latin and Greek grammars. In two years his popularity as a teacher grew to the point that he had 600 students attending his lectures; about 400 attended Luther's.³³ Melanchthon's skills won him a reputation as the leading "humanist" scholar in Europe next to Erasmus (ca. 1466-1536), whom he greatly admired.³⁴ At Wittenberg Melanchthon came under Luther's influence as well. He attended Luther's Leipzig Debate with Johann Eck (1486-1543) in 1519, and was won over to Luther's Reformation views. From then on he put his great gifts to use in promoting Reformation of the Church, earning Luther's life-long esteem and gratitude. Melanchthon's contributions included his 1521 book entitled *Loci Communes* (i.e. "Basic Concepts"), the first systematic formulation of Protestant theology. Also, it was Melanchthon who formulated the expressions *sola gratia* and *sola fide* as the basic principles of the Reformation.³⁵ Indeed it has been shown that Melanchthon probably aided Luther in coming to a clear and fully developed understanding of these concepts.³⁶ Furthermore, the main confessional writings of Lutherans to this day have been the *Augsburg Confession* (1530) and its *Apology* (1531), both authored by Melanchthon.

Most important to this paper is Melanchthon's role as a negotiator with the various religious parties of the day. As Kurt Aland puts it:³⁷

Until 1559 there was hardly a religious colloquy or meeting dealing with questions of the Evangelical Church and theology... in which Melanchthon did not take part.

These included negotiations to heal differences between the Lutherans and fellow Protestants as well as efforts to heal the breach with the Roman Catholics. In 1539 alone Melanchthon attended Conferences at Leipzig, Frankfurt and Nurnberg, all promoting improved relations with the Catholics. It was also in 1539 that he carefully composed a treatise entitled, *The Church and the Authority of the Word*.³⁸ It represented some of Melanchthon's deepest reflections on the nature of tradition. The treatise has been called "the first history of doctrines from the Protestant standpoint."³⁹

Melanchthon wrote on the matter of tradition because of problems that he faced on at least three fronts. He addressed "moderate" Catholics who

reproached the Reformers for introducing novel doctrines, and for forsaking the traditions represented in the authority of the Church and the fathers.⁴⁰ He was concerned, secondly, about the “tyranny carried on by the pontiffs and their satellites” who exalted the authority of the Church and its tradition over the Word of God. And finally, Melanchthon was concerned about those Reformation Radicals, such as the Unitarian Michael Servetus (1511-1553), who “absolutely reject the unanimity of the true Church and all of the synods without discrimination.”⁴¹ It was the second concern that Melanchthon took most seriously. He wrote especially, he said, so that the pious might

fortify themselves against the sophistry of those who falsely quote the testimonies of the dogmas of antiquity and of the church in defense of wicked dogmas.⁴²

More particularly, he twice emphasized his desire to help “younger persons” decide when it was right to follow the example of antiquity and when not.⁴³ For many young people had been intimidated into opposing the Reformation because of its departures from tradition.

The subject of Melanchthon’s treatise was three-fold:⁴⁴

I shall relate in order what the Church is, in what respect it must be heard, and how proved testimonies may be used.

He defined the Church as “the assembly of true believers who have the Gospel and the Sacraments and who are being sanctified by the Holy Spirit ... Ephesians 5 and John 10.”⁴⁵ He thereby emphasized that the Church was *not* the estate of the popes, nor constituted by a succession of bishops. And so the “authority of the Church” only pertained to the true Church, not the Church of the popes. He then noted that even the true Church “can possess errors which obscure the articles of faith.”⁴⁶ Quoting Paul, he argued that the true Church sometimes contains straw along with the gold — that is, improper opinions and practices. And therefore we should never believe something merely on the authority of the Church.

Let us hear the Church when she teaches and admonishes, but not believe merely because of the authority of the Church...A hearer...believes the article not because of the authority of the Church but because he sees that this opinion has firm proofs in Scripture itself.⁴⁷

The Church should be “heard” when it is faithful to Scripture.

Likewise, in evaluating the “testimonies” of the Church Fathers and councils Melanchthon stated the same rule.

When heard they must be judged according to the Word of God which abides always as the rule of doctrine.⁴⁸

The bulk of Melanchthon's treatise was then taken up with elaboration of this point by means of examples. He moved chronologically through some of the great authors and synods of antiquity, noting with approval their Scriptural insights, and frankly condemning them where they were unscriptural. Tertullian (*fl.* 200), for example, provided some "useful testimonies" on the Trinity. However, Melanchthon observed that he also taught "some rather puerile customs, for example that one should not take a bath for seven days after Baptism."⁴⁹ Over half the treatise consisted of such a catalogue of the "errors" of many ancient authors and of the "madness and wickedness" of many bishops. The result was a discerning view of Church History from the perspective of Protestant theology.

In conclusion Melanchthon turned the accusation of his Catholic opponents against themselves. He insisted that it was they who had forsaken the teachings and practices of the ancient Church. On the other hand,

the kind of doctrine we profess expresses the very consensus of the catholic church of Christ, as indicated by the confessions, the saner synods, and the more learned fathers.⁵⁰

Others have shown that this esteem for the ancient creeds and fathers remained the same throughout Melanchthon's life.⁵¹

In surveying his 1539 treatise Melanchthon's view of the relative authority of Scripture and tradition has emerged with great clarity. He affirmed unequivocally the supreme authority of Scripture as the only sure "rule of doctrine." He spoke of "the highest authority of the Word of God."⁵² On the authority and role of tradition we have seen that Melanchthon sought to avoid extremes, especially those represented by the Roman Catholic hierarchy and some Protestant Radicals in his day. His wide and ready acquaintance with the writings of the Church Fathers is evidence of his desire to give some place to the voice of tradition. There was need, however, to pick and choose, for the Church synods and Fathers often "contradict"⁵³ one another, and not all were faithful to Scripture.

We must look around to see...which assembly of the fathers and of the synods is purer...The fathers who have fought in the most bitter controversies and have retained pious dogmas are well-deserving of posterity.⁵⁴

His favourite fathers were Augustine and Ambrose (*ca.* 339-397).⁵⁵ We see that his interest in tradition was focused and guided by the lens of the Scriptures. Melanchthon gave a degree of subsidiary authority to those fathers "more skilled in spiritual matters." He said that these deserved great

honour, "even the highest praise."⁵⁶ These men possessed authority to the degree that they would "usefully teach" the Word of God. Their authority derived from Scripture, and their voice should be heeded when it was the voice of Scripture.

Melanchthon gave tradition an important role in the Church. He valued "the consensus" of the true Church of Christ, contained in councils and confessions, as timeless expressions of Scriptural truth, and thus not to be ignored.

Devout synods are well deserving since they preserved some articles of Christian doctrine.⁵⁷

Melanchthon held the Radicals accountable for disregarding these careful expressions of Christian truth. Besides this credal, doctrinal role of tradition, Melanchthon also saw a practical and hermeneutical role for it. When we see that great saints throughout history have practiced and believed what we do, we are encouraged in our own convictions and interpretations. "They confirm our position by their testimony."⁵⁸

Melanchthon's position on tradition represents a variation of the view of Vincent of Lérins. Melanchthon shared with Vincent a respect for the voice of the ecumenical councils and the great teachers of the past. He further supported the role of the consensus of the true Church in guarding Scriptural interpretation from novelty and error. However, Melanchthon explicitly denied Vincent's claim that there was ever a consentient voice of universality and antiquity. He probably had Vincent in mind when he noted that in the synods and fathers "contradictory subject matter is to be found."⁵⁹ For Melanchthon tradition did not exist as a clear, consistent voice that solved all problems of biblical interpretation to the same degree that it did for Vincent. For Vincent the "approved" masters were many; for Melanchthon they were few. For Vincent tradition held the key to interpreting Scripture; for Melanchthon there was more of a reciprocal relationship whereby tradition guarded the right use of Scripture, but Scripture, in turn, also guarded the right use of tradition! Tradition was not a final, but rather a confirming, help in our understanding of Scripture.

4. Thieleman J. van Braght, *Martyrs' Mirror* (1660)

It is especially appropriate that as Baptists we consider finally the Anabaptist view of tradition. Anabaptists share with us many principles common to our own believer's Church heritage. When thousands of Protestants were dying a martyr's death in the sixteenth-century, their relatives and friends began collecting their letters, poems and testimonies into books. These "martyrologies" were an effort to pass on the valued tradition of the martyrs as an inspiration to later generations.

One of the first Anabaptist martyrbooks appeared in 1533 as a small

appendix to the 1527 Scheitheim Confession and described the martyrdom of Michael Sattler.⁶⁰ Based on eyewitness accounts the booklet listed the charges against Sattler, Sattler's response, and an inter-change between Sattler and the town clerk. Then the sentence was given:⁶¹

Judgement is passed that Michael Sattler shall be delivered to the executioner, who shall lead him to the place of execution and cut out his tongue; then throw him upon a wagon and there tear his body twice with red hot tongs; and after he has been brought without the gate he shall be pinched five times in the same manner. After this had been done...he was burned to ashes as a heretic.

Soon larger collections of martyrdom accounts were compiled by the Mennonites, the most important of which was the *Martyrs' Mirror* by Thieleman J. van Braght in 1660.

Thieleman Jansz van Braght was pastor of the Flemish Mennonite congregation in Dordrecht from 1648 to his death in 1664. Through the influence of William of Orange there existed a greater degree of liberty of conscience in Dutch society than anywhere else in Europe at that time. Even so; in 1650 Van Braght had to face the Church council of Dordrecht on charges that "he, while preaching on a barge in Rotterdam, had defamed the 'teaching and truth' of the Reformed Confessions."⁶² As a conscientious Pastor living a hundred years after the Anabaptist martyrs of whom he wrote, Van Braght felt that religious freedom had come to pose an even greater threat to the faithful than persecution had done in former times.

These are sad times in which we live; truly there is more danger now than in the time of our fathers who suffered death for the testimony of the Lord.⁶³

What was the danger? Now that times were "quieter and more comfortable" Satan had come in like a wolf in sheep's clothing. The world now revealed itself to the Mennonites as

very beautiful and glorious, more than at any preceding time.

Van Braght's "Preface" thus gave the faithful this warning:⁶⁴

If you are overcome by the world it will soon put an end to your Christian and virtuous life, without which the best of faith is of no avail.

In response to this danger Van Braght compiled his martyrology as the antidote. He felt that the Lord had especially spared him during six months of serious illness so that he could finish his task.

Thy hand rescued me so that ... in the midst of my difficulties and contrary to the advice and opinion of the physicians ... I wrote and finished the greater part of this work.⁶⁵

Van Braght achieved a prodigious accomplishment. Drawing on such sources as the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731) and Sebastian Franck's *Chronica* (1531), Van Braght gave an account of believers' baptism as it was practised from the first century to the fifteenth century. For each century he also provided an account of those who died as martyrs for this faith. He only included those who had kept "the true foundation of salvation, that is, Christ." He was careful to exclude the Munsterite Anabaptists, who, he said, "claim that one must propagate and defend his religion with the sword."⁶⁶

As if this were not enough, he also re-edited a 1631 Dutch martyrbook covering the years 1524-1614. He checked the accounts for accuracy by comparison with the death sentences contained in court records, and the archives in Dordrecht and Amsterdam.⁶⁷ Moreover, he added new accounts of many other sixteenth-century martyrs. Even by modern standards Van Braght's work has been called "a reliable, trustworthy book."⁶⁸

Van Braght movingly described his own emotional involvement with the project. He related how "remembrance of the sufferings and death of Thy martyrs ... caused my tears to flow." His empathy was such that:⁶⁹

It seemed to me as though I accompanied them to the place of execution ... saying to them, Fight valiantly dear brethren and sisters; the crown of life awaits you. I almost fancied that I had died with them.

His work has moved others as well, for it has gone through many editions in Dutch, German and English.

What role did Van Braght hope his book would perform in the Church? Why a martyrology for a Church beset with worldliness? He argued that there was divine wisdom in setting forth the lives of these suffering saints:⁷⁰

Men are more easily converted by examples than by good teaching, because examples are more impressive; yet here you have both.

Van Braght's book showed theology in action, Biblical faith in the flesh. We might say today that it is a book of over 4,000 moving sermon illustrations. Accounts of these "heroes of the new covenant" would teach "not so much by words as by deeds." And so he felt that the proper use of this martyr tradition would have dramatic benefits in the Church of his day.

Persons of every age may enter this school of practice in virtue; the young, the middle-aged and the old, all shall be led to true godliness by the living examples of those who went before them.⁷¹

This tradition of living examples could stir up the new generation of believers to live out Biblical faith in their day as well. To this end he called on the new generation to remember and imitate the martyrs.

The “authority” of this martyr tradition is the authority of Biblical examples. These are models of *Biblical* faith and this is the basis of their authority. As such, they must *not* be ignored!

The honour ... due to the holy martyrs is infinitely greater and better than that of earthly heroes... It is the will of God that they should not only always be remembered here among men, but He Himself purposes never to forget [them].⁷²

After all, the Old Testament “seems to be almost exclusively a book of martyrs;” and the martyrs are highly esteemed in Hebrews 11:3-38. This esteem and honour should carry over to the post-Biblical martyrs as well. Their voice should be heeded.

In conclusion, we cite the following evaluation of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist view of tradition, for it applies equally well to Van Braght:

Anabaptists by no means rejected all history and tradition ... but developed and applied specific norms ... for selecting which periods of history they could identify with.⁷³

Thus, while Melancthon gave a *hermeneutical* role to the tradition of the *fathers* and great teachers of the Church, Van Braght gave a *sanctifying*, ethical role to the tradition of the *martyrs* of the Church.

5. Conclusion

The role and authority of tradition as conceived by Melancthon and Van Braght appear highly compatible with our Baptist ecclesiology and our commitment to the authority of Scripture. As Baptists we believe in the priesthood of all believers and in congregational Church government. By heeding the voice of tradition we extend democracy to the dead and give our great-grandparents a vote. As Chesterton put it, heeding tradition means “refusing to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about.”⁷⁴ How arbitrary to limit the gifts of God’s Spirit in the Church (Ephesians 4:11, 12) to teachers who are living. Indeed we are commanded in Scripture to heed the lessons learned by God’s people in the past (Hebrews 6:12; Deuteronomy 8:2). By affirming tradition we open ourselves to the Spirit-given insights of the whole of God’s people through the ages. Likewise we enhance the authority of Scripture when we heed its *best* interpreters as found in the Christian tradition. Understanding and applying Scripture is hard work and we need all the help we can get. The

Baptist theologian Roger Nicole has likened the man who neglects tradition to the climber who begins at sea level when he could start at 3,000 feet!

This paper is a plea not for traditionalism, the dead faith of the living, but for tradition, the living faith of the dead.⁷⁵ There are great benefits to giving this tradition a louder voice among Baptists. It has been noted that “in the history of the church lie untold treasures of theological thought, devotional literature, and guidelines for nearly every issue which Christians face today.” “To enrich our own Christianity by ransacking the traditional wealth of all Christendom is open to each of us, if God gives us sense to do it.”⁷⁶ Thereby we are delivered from the tyranny of being tied to our own thoughts and to our own age. Yes, it is time that as Baptists we took another look at tradition.

¹ *A History of the Baptists* (3rd ed.; Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1963), p. 513.

² *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 1: 258.

³ This approach is well-represented by *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, ed. Steven E. Ozment (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), and Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250 - 1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. xi.

⁴ *Forerunners of the Reformation* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p.4. See also *idem*, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).

⁵ See “Quo Vadis? Tradition from Irenaeus to Humani Generis,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 16 (1963), 225 - 255, and *Forerunners*, chapter two. There Oberman notes: “One of the most remarkable developments in the study of medieval thought is the attention which has been given in the last decade to the medieval discussion of the relation between Scripture and Tradition” He attributes this partly to the interest of sixteenth-century historians in the subject (p. 53).

⁶ See especially Peter Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum: The Function of the Patristic Argument in the Theology of Philip Melanchthon* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1961) and James R. Payton, “Sola Scriptura and Church History: The Views of Bucer and Melanchthon on Religious Authority in 1539” (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Waterloo, 1982).

⁷ This article appeared four years later: “The Contemporary Relevance of Christendom’s Creeds,” *Themelios*, 7, No.2 (January 1982), 9-16, especially p. 15.

⁸ “How I Use Tradition in Doing Theology,” *TSF Bulletin* (September - October, 1982), 2 -5, especially p. 4. This article received responses from Avery Dulles and David Wells in the January -February and May - June 1983 issues of *Themelios* respectively. The wider evangelical interest in tradition is evident in R. Webber, *Common Roots* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978);

“The Chicago Call” of 1977 which called for evangelicals to re-appropriate “the fullness of our Christian heritage”; and Stanley Gundry’s Presidential address in December, 1978 to the Evangelical Theological Society, which suggested that ecclesiology was the most needy area of discussion, especially “the search for Church continuity and connection with tradition.” Cf. Stanley Gundry, “Evangelical Theology: Where Should We Be Going?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 22 (1979), 7.

⁹ B. Jackson, “Prolegomena,” *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series* eds. P. Schaff and H. Wace (1895 ed.; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), VIII, xxi). It was Basil who conceived the Greek Trinitarian formula, “One ousia and three hypostaseis,” equivalent of the Latin, “Three persons in one substance.” See E.R. Hardy, “General Introduction,” in his ed., *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 23.

¹⁰ *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980), p. 65.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30-32.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 33, 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 98-100. Before Basil, Irenaeus (d. ca. 200) had repudiated the notion of “secret” traditions, holding only to “the apostolic tradition made manifest in every church throughout the world.” This tradition was faithfully preserved and “preached to men” by bishops “appointed ... by the Apostles, and their successors down to our own day” [*Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. H. Bettenson (2nd ed.; London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 68].

¹⁴ *On the Holy Spirit*, p. 107,112.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 107,98.

¹⁶ George Tavard, “The Authority of Scripture and Tradition,” in J. M. Todd, ed. *Problems of Authority* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1962), p. 29-30.

¹⁷ C.A. Heurtley, “Introduction,” *The Commonitory of Vincent of Lérins [A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series* eds. P. Schaff and H. Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), XI, 127].

¹⁸ *Commonitory*, p. 131.

¹⁹ Heurtley, “Introduction”, p. 127, n. 2.

²⁰ Cf. “commonitorium,” *A Latin Dictionary*, rev. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), p. 382.

²¹ *Commonitory*, p. 131, 152-153.

²² Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 333; Oberman, *Forerunners*, p. 58.

²³ *Commonitory*, p. 132.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 132, 153.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 132, 152.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 132, 134.

- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- ³¹ George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 10.
- ³² Clyde L. Manschreck, *Melanchthon: The Quiet Reformer* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958).
- ³³ Kurt Aland, *Four Reformers: Luther, Melanchthon, Calvin, Zwingli*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979), p. 61-63.
- ³⁴ The Humanist movement was a movement among scholars with a program for educational reform. They promoted study of the humanities such as grammar, history, and rhetoric, and opposed the emphasis of the Scholastic theologians upon Aristotle, logic and canon law. Cf. Paul O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought, The Classic, Scholastic and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961) and Myron P. Gilmore, *The World of Humanism, 1453 - 1517* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952).
- ³⁵ Louis Bouyer, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism* (London: Harvill Press, 1956), p. 14.
- ³⁶ Lowell C. Green, "Faith, Righteousness, and Justification: New Light on their Development under Luther and Melanchthon," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 4, No. 1 (April, 1972), especially p. 77-83.
- ³⁷ *Four Reformers*, p.73.
- ³⁸ *Melanchthon, Selected Writings*, trans. C. L. Hill (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978), p. 130-186.
- ³⁹ Herrlinger referred to it as "der ersten Dogmengeschichte vom Prot. Standpunkt" [cited W. Maurer, "Melanchthon, Philipp," *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1960), IV, 839].
- ⁴⁰ *The Church and the Authority of the Word*, p. 177-178.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 131,133.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 133,180.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 142-143.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- ⁵¹ Peter Fraenkel, "Revelation and Tradition: Notes on Some Aspects of Doctrinal Continuity in the Theology of Philip Melanchthon," *Studia Theologica*, 13 (1959), 99, 125-7.
- ⁵² *Church and Authority of the Word*, p. 135.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 145,150.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- ⁵⁵ Melanchthon wrote, "I do not appeal to all the authors but only to the better

ones like Ambrose, Augustine, and others in so far as they agree with them” [*Church and Authority of the Word*, p. 177.]

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 143,150,176-177.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 145,141,150,171.

⁶⁰ Christian Neff, “Martyr Books,” *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottsdale Pennsylvania: Mennonite Publishing House, 1957), III, 518.

⁶¹ Thielemen J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs’ Mirror* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1977), p. 418. Henceforth called *Martyrs’ Mirror*.

⁶² Alan F. Kreider, ““The Servant is not Greater than his Master”: The Anabaptists and the Suffering Church,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 58 (1984), 25.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶⁴ *Martyrs’ Mirror*, p. 8-10.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5. On p. 1139 there appears a hymn by Thieleman’s brother in which he reflects on Thieleman’s work in the midst of illness.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19, 17.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁶⁸ N. van der Zijp, “Martyrs’ Mirror,” *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, III., 527-528.

⁷⁰ *Martyrs’ Mirror*, p. 15.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13,14.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 13,14.

⁷³ Cornelius J. Dyck, “The Place of Tradition in Dutch Anabaptism,” *Church History*, 43 (1974), 35.

⁷⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), p. 48.

⁷⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 65.

⁷⁶ R. Webber, *Common Roots* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p. 20; J.I. Packer, *Beyond the Battle for the Bible* (Westchester: Cornerstone Books, 1980), p. 36,33.

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