

Scripture and Tradition in Reformation Thought

Gerald Bray

[p.157]

It was inevitable that the Reformation would raise the question of tradition and its role in the life of the church. Any challenge to the existing order of things starts from the assumption that something must be wrong with it, and the defenders of the status quo usually find it all too easy to reply that the existing order must not be tampered with because 'things have always been done this way'. It is a phenomenon which repeats itself every time something new is proposed, and there will always be those who will leap to the defence of 'tradition' in order to thwart the process of change. But the common perception that in the sixteenth-century Reformation the Papal party defended tradition while the Reformers rejected it, is much too simplistic. In reality, both (or all) sides in the debate were forced to confront a corrupt state of affairs and reform it by developing an understanding of what tradition was and how it should be used in the life of the church.

What became the Roman Catholic Church answered this question in one way, while Luther and his imitators answered it in others. Among the Protestants, as the Reformers came to be called, two opposing tendencies were evident from the beginning. On the one hand there were the 'conservatives' who basically wanted to purify the church according to Scripture, but who believed that that could be done quite adequately with only minimal violence to existing practices and customs. On the other hand there were the 'radicals', who thought that all traditions were by definition corruptions, and ought to be discarded in favour of a Church order based exclusively on the clear testimony of Scripture.

These two tendencies became apparent almost immediately, when the radicals challenged the practice of infant baptism, which they believed was the result of a 'corrupt following of the Apostles'.¹ Could this ancient and universal practice be defended from the New Testament

[p.157]

alone? A movement which wanted its reforms to be consonant with the teaching of Holy Scripture soon discovered that answers to a question like that would not easily be found, and that different conclusions would produce further splits within an already fractured church. Before long, the 'conservatives' were asking themselves whether it was really necessary, or even possible, to construct church order and discipline exclusively from the text of Scripture. Was not some deference to tradition, however minimal or unacknowledged, essential if decency and order were to be preserved? Once this was admitted, the 'conservatives' had to confront the 'radicals' with an understanding of tradition which allowed for it within a doctrinal framework based on the fundamental principle of *sola Scriptura*.

PRE REFORMATION

For whatever else may be said of it, there is no doubt that *sola Scriptura* ('Scripture alone') was, and has remained, one of the most basic beliefs of the Reformation. The notion can be

¹ The actual phrase comes from Article XXV of the Church of England, where it was applied to the five non-Gospel sacraments.

traced back to John Wycliffe (d. 1384), who expounded it in his book *De veritate Sacrae Scripturae* (1378). Wycliffe was writing at a time when the traditional authority of the Papacy was receiving a new blow from the Great Schism (1378-1417), and it is surely not accidental that the ecumenical condemnation of his writings coincided with the healing of that division at the Council of Constance.²

Wycliffe upheld the unique authority of Scripture on the ground that because it is the Word of God, it must reflect the Divine Mind. In this respect, he belonged to the realist school of medieval philosophy, in contrast to Luther, who saw himself as the inheritor of the nominalist tradition of William of Ockham. Because of Scripture's character, claimed Wycliffe, it possessed an inherent perfection which was denied to any human agent, whether it be Pope, Council or priest. Wycliffe's views about the Bible were substantially orthodox and would probably have caused less of a sensation had they not been linked to a reinterpretation of church doctrine which went far beyond condemning the excessive claims of the late medieval Papacy. For Wycliffe believed that Scripture demonstrated that the doctrine of transubstantiation, which had been formally adopted at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, after about 350 years of semi-official acceptance, was contrary to the plain teaching of the biblical text. As he argued the matter, when Jesus said: 'This is my body' he could not possibly have meant: 'This body is my body', since that would be a nonsense. He must have meant: 'This bread is my body'. It was thus clear to him that the eucharistic bread remained after consecration every bit as much as it had been before, and there was therefore no 'miracle of the altar', as most of the more enthusiastic medieval churchgoers believed.

Wycliffe's repudiation of such an important doctrine got him into trouble even with many who were prepared to

[p.159]

support his attacks on the Papacy. The scenario is a familiar one. An academic, speaking philosophical language, challenged a belief dear to the hearts of a large and influential section of the laity. The result was that Wycliffe lost the support of the very elements he most needed to win if his cause were to succeed. The whole episode provides an interesting foretaste of what would happen again in the sixteenth century, when there would be many who had little time for Papal claims, but who did not want the substance of 'Catholic doctrine' to be altered in any way, and so ended up as opponents of a movement which they had initially supported.

REFORMATION

Luther inherited Wycliffe's doctrine of *sola Scriptura* and made it a watchword of his Reformation, though the intellectual and spiritual climate were by then very different. In Luther's world, the main appeal of Scripture was its antiquity. Of course, Luther also regarded it as the Word of God, but his approach to that aspect of the matter was far more pragmatic (we might even say 'scholarly') than Wycliffe's had been. For example, Luther regarded the limits of the canon of Scripture as a humanly imposed tradition, and felt free to doubt the church's accepted practice. His inclination to reject a book like James was not followed by his disciples, but it does show how 'liberal' Luther could be with his material.

² Wycliffe had already been condemned several times in England. See e.g. A. Kenny, *Wycliffe*, OUP, Oxford, 1985.

The antiquity of the text appealed to the humanist culture to which Luther spoke, because it corresponded to one of its most cherished assumptions. This was that the sources of Christian teaching were pure, and had been corrupted in the course of time. Wycliffe would have understood that argument, but whereas he saw the corruption as having begun in relatively recent times (in the twelfth century, for all practical purposes), Luther and his followers came to see it as having started much earlier. Indeed, it eventually became an issue as to whether there had ever been a pure church, even in New Testament times! In this intellectual climate, tradition (and the process of its corruption) took on a whole new meaning and importance.

In the pre-Reformation Western Church, tradition had long referred to those unwritten practices and beliefs which had been handed down (in principle) from apostolic time. There were innumerable habits and customs which Christians employed, which they regarded as appropriate manifestations of their faith, but which were not actually prescribed in Holy Writ.³ When some of them were challenged, the answer was relatively straightforward—such practices had always existed in the church and been understood as promoting, not as hindering, the witness of the gospel.

The most serious attack on this ancient tradition occurred during the iconoclastic controversies (726-842),

[p.160]

when a group of Byzantine puritan *avant la lettre* denounced the presence of images in churches. The Seventh Ecumenical Council, held at Nicaea in 787, condemned this position, which it perceived to be Judaistic, and proclaimed that the traditional veneration of images was not only permissible, it was necessary if Christ were to be truly worshipped as the incarnate Son of God.⁴

From the Protestant point of view, it was this passage from the permissible to the essential which marks the vital turning-point. There had long been a tendency to condemn certain traditional practices as 'Judaistic'; one thinks for example of the quartodeciman celebration of Easter in the second century, or the use of azymes (unleavened bread) in the eucharist, which was denounced at the Council in Trullo in 692. But the imposition of icons as a necessary ingredient in worship marked a further shift—from negative condemnation of one tradition to positive insistence on another. It is perhaps not surprising that the decisions of this Council were never fully implemented in the West, nor that they have been almost universally repudiated by even the most historically conservative Protestants.

³ Tertullian (fl. c. 196-c. 212) provides an interesting list of them in *De corona* 3. On the subject of baptism, for instance, he records that there was a threefold immersion, followed by a tasting of a mixture of milk and honey, after which the newly baptised person would refrain from washing for a week!

⁴ The three anathemas of the Council put the matter very succinctly. These read:

1. If anyone does not confess that Christ our God can be represented in his humanity, let him be anathema.
2. If anyone does not accept representation in art of evangelical scenes, let him be anathema.
3. If anyone does not salute such representations as standing for the Lord and his saints, let him be anathema.

Text and translation in N. P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Georgetown UP, Washington, 1990, Vol. 1, p. 137.

COUNTER REFORMATION

At the time of the Reformation, supporters of the Roman position clung to this ancient understanding of tradition, which is formally enshrined in the first decree of the Fourth Session of the Council of Trent (8 April 1546):

'The council clearly perceives that this truth (i.e. the Gospel) and rule are contained in written books and in unwritten traditions which were received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or else have come down to us, handed on as it were from the Apostles themselves at the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.'⁵

Neither Luther nor most of the early Reformers would have objected to the retention of primitive traditions which clearly helped to illuminate the gospel, though they would have been unhappy with the statement that the traditions concerned had been given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, since there was nothing in Scripture to indicate this. They regarded all such practices as ultimately subject to the control of

[p.161]

Scripture, which provided the basis on which their meaning was to be understood.⁶ They would also have wanted to say that traditions of this kind were essentially *adiaphora* ('things indifferent'), which might be helpful or even desirable, but which could not be made compulsory. The most succinct and readily available statement of this position is the one which Archbishop Thomas Cranmer prefaced to the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*, and which has continued to be included in all subsequent editions and revisions of that Book. It is the piece entitled: Of ceremonies, why some be abolished and some retained, and its most significant points are as follows:

The ceremonies (i.e. traditions) of the Church may be divided into three distinct types. Some were devised with 'godly intent and purpose', but later became corrupted. They ought to be restored to their original purity, or if that is impossible, replaced. Others 'entered into the Church by indiscreet devotion, and such a zeal as was without knowledge'. These were 'winked at in the beginning' and subsequently grew into major abuses. Ceremonies of this kind ought to be abolished. Lastly, there are ceremonies which, although they were devised by man, were intended to promote the decent order of the Church and continue to perform that function. These ceremonies ought to be retained and used as regularly as possible, not because it is a sin to omit them, but because it is a Scriptural command that all things be done decently and in order.

THE ENGLISH REFORMATION

The number of ceremonies in the pre-Reformation Church had become grossly inflated, to the point where keeping them all had become an impossible burden. It was therefore necessary to

⁵ ... (synodus) perspicisusque, hanc veritatem et disciplinam contineri in libris scriptis et sine scripto traditionibus, quae ab ipsius Christi ore ab apostolis acceptae, aut ab ipsis Apostolis Spiritu Sancto dictante quasi per manus traditae ad nos usque pervenerunt Text and translation in N. P. Tanner, *op cit.* Vol. 2, p. 663. It is interesting to note in passing that the decree then goes on to list the canonical books of Scripture, the first time that an Ecumenical Council had done so.

⁶ For a discussion of this point, see P. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1966, pp. 3-8.

pare them down, so that those which were to be retained might fulfil their purpose more effectively.

On the second point, it is interesting to note that Thomas Cranmer's argument consisted of three fundamental aspects. First he appealed to St Augustine, who had also complained of an excess of ceremonial in his own time. This shows that for Cranmer, the Patristic tradition retained its authority as a source for Christian doctrine and worship. Second, Cranmer claimed that had Augustine been alive in the sixteenth century, he would have supported the Reformation. This (very common) assertion shows that the Reformers believed that they were the true inheritors of the ancient Fathers, as well as of the New Testament Church. Third, Cranmer regarded the excess of ceremonial as evidence of a Judaizing tendency, a remark which, as we have already seen, had been common to would-be reformers of tradition from ancient times onwards.

Cranmer's views, aided by the judicious and principled way in which he expressed them, would doubtless have commanded the assent of Luther, had he still been alive, and were not objected to by Calvin as far as we know. However, it has to be recorded that as the Reformation developed a puritanical strain, it was often on precisely these matters of principle that divisions arose. The clearest example of this is

[p.162]

provided by the English situation, where the more zealous found traces of 'Popery' in many ancient practices of the church which could not claim express scriptural support. Cranmer himself was well aware of this, and devoted the middle section of his preface to answering his critics on both the right and the left. But such was the dynamic of the Reformation that a generation later Richard Hooker was obliged to defend the (reformed) Church of England against its Puritan detractors, by pointing out that their version of *sola Scriptura* was actually too narrow to be called scriptural!⁷

MARTIN LUTHER

When Luther denounced 'tradition', which he often did with his characteristic vehemence, he was normally talking about something quite different from what the Council of Trent had in mind. Luther took his cue from Jesus' own condemnation of the Pharisees, who were accused of 'teaching as doctrine the commandments of men' (Mt. 15:9). What this meant to him was that the medieval church, like the Pharisees of old, were insisting on a number of ritual observances and other pious practices which, although they were meant to further the message of salvation, in practice obscured and even denied it. Instead of the free grace of the gospel, proclaimed in the New Testament, Christian were being burdened with the demands of canon law (among them, for example, compulsory clerical celibacy), which had nothing to do with redemption but which, in the eyes of the contemporary church, were treated as being of equal, and sometimes as of greater, importance than the cardinal doctrine of justification by faith. To quote Luther:

Examine the canons, and you will see that the transgression of the traditions of the Pope are punished with far greater severity than transgressions of the Law of God... The Pope not

⁷ R. Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, III.

only did away with divinely instituted matrimony, but he sullied it outright, as though it were an unholy kind of life and were displeasing to God.

From the Sacrament of the Eucharist the Pope has not only removed the cup and—Contrary to what is right—taken it away from the Church; but he has changed Christ's testament into a sacrifice and a work that is done for profit.⁸

Generations of Catholic apologists, from the sixteenth century onwards, have questioned this interpretation of the Church's teaching, and in a formal sense, they have doubtless been right to do so. Clerical celibacy, for example, has never been defended *iure divino* as essential to salvation; it was, and is, officially no more than a discipline imposed on the ordained ministry. Likewise, communion in one kind was not intended to signify any change in doctrine; Catholic apologists have always been at pains to point out that the recipient in one kind receives the fulness of the body and blood of Christ. But clerical celibacy is a discipline which allows of few if

[p.163]

any real exceptions, and those subjected to it might well feel that too much is being asked of them. Similarly, communion in one kind (for the laity only) is very difficult to justify, and flies in the face of obvious New Testament practice. It may be advantageous in certain situations (e.g. communion of the sick), but it is hard to see why it should be made compulsory for everyone all the time. In reality, the legal distinction between doctrine and discipline makes little difference; the one is as obligatory as the other. But it is important to note that in Roman Catholic theology, neither of these practices belongs to sacred tradition, since they cannot be traced back to apostolic times. Because of this, what Luther denounced can be waived by the Roman Church without contradicting the decree of the Council of Trent.⁹

Luther's attacks on 'tradition' were directed mainly against disciplines of this kind which he believed had been added to the simple gospel, and imposed on people as an additional requirement for salvation. This understanding is reflected in many of the early credal statements, such as the Augsburg Confession of 1530, where practices of this kind are denounced as recent and unscriptural innovations.¹⁰ In calling them traditions, Luther was employing a biblical term, but in a way which was different from what had become customary in the pre-Reformation Church. Furthermore, Luther did not object to these 'traditions' because they were unwritten—they were not—but because they were novelties, which he perceived as a departure from the norms of ancient times.

Where it was a question of an ancient practice not clearly taught in Scripture (i.e. of tradition in the Roman sense), Luther was much more conservative. Infant baptism provides a classic example of this. When challenged to demonstrate that the baptism of children was a New Testament practice, Luther had to resort to a complex defence which ultimately rested on the

⁸ From Luther's commentary on Gn. 17:8 (*Works*, J. Pelikan ed., Vol. 3, Concordia, St. Louis, 1961, pp. 121-122).

⁹ In fact, the cup has now largely been restored to the laity in the Roman Church, and many people feel that the abolition of compulsory clerical celibacy is only a matter of time.

¹⁰ The second section of the Augsburg Confession contains seven articles devoted almost exclusively to demonstrating this point.

assertion of an unbroken and unchallenged custom which reached back to apostolic times.¹¹ Like Wycliffe before him, he was not prepared to see corruption in the life of the church from (almost) the very beginning; rather, it was something which had crept in during the Middle Ages, at some unspecified time after the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451).

Luther's belief that the church had retained its doctrinal purity throughout the Patristic era, losing it gradually only during the so-called Dark Ages, reflected the consensus of Renaissance humanism, which regarded the period after the fall of the Western Roman Empire as one of unrelieved corruption and decay. It was a view which came to be adopted by almost everyone who had been influenced by Erasmus, and in varying degrees it may be regarded as typical of Luther, Calvin

[p.164]

and the English Reformers. It is only fair to add that many Catholics also shared this view, though of course they did not regard the medieval corruption of the church as quite so extensive. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the Catholic 'Counter-Reformation' also went back to the sources in an effort to correct abuses and errors which had crept in, even in the text of the Latin Vulgate.¹²

JOHN CALVIN

The first major breach in this 'conservative' Protestant consensus occurred at Geneva, as a result of the teaching of Calvin. Calvin himself was a humanist in the Erasmian tradition, who had a high regard for the traditions of the Patristic period. For example, he defended the use of non-Scriptural vocabulary like 'person' and 'Trinity' in the formulation of Christian doctrine, and criticized those who objected to such Innovations'.¹³

But at the same time, his approach to the application of the *sola Scriptura* principle was different from Luther's, and produced a new type of conflict within the Protestant movement.

Where Luther had generally been content to purge the church of what he regarded as anti-Evangelical corruptions, Calvin wanted to build the church exclusively on the basis of what was taught in Scripture.¹⁴ This was basically the same principle as that of the Anabaptist 'radicals', though Calvin's conclusions were not the same as theirs. It is probably easiest to picture him as trying to achieve a balance between the two Protestant tendencies. In the end, he can be said to have used the Anabaptist principle to obtain results much closer to those of the Lutherans.

¹¹ See. P. Althaus, *op. cit.*, pp. 359-374.

¹² The Vulgate was thoroughly revised and reissued in 1592. It is interesting to note that the English Catholic translators of the Douay-Rheims Bible justified their choice of the Vulgate as their basic text not only on the ground that it was the church's decision, but also because they believed that since Jerome had had access to Greek and Hebrew manuscripts earlier than any which were then extant, his translation reflected a more primitive, and therefore more authentic reading of the original text! This assertion was highly dubious in general terms, of course, but on particular points the Catholic translators have been shown to be more accurate. For the relevant material, see G. L. Bray ed., *Documents of the English Reformation*, James Clarke, Cambridge, 1994.

¹³ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1, 13, 2-5.

¹⁴ For a discussion of this and what it involved, see R. S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation: A Study of Calvin as Social Worker, Churchman, Pastor and Theologian*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1988, pp. 131-146.

For example, if it could be shown (as Calvin believed it could) that the episcopal system of Church government was post-apostolic, and that in the New Testament there was no real distinction between bishops and presbyters ('priests'), then it seemed clear that the government of the church ought ideally to be what we would now call 'presbyterian'. This was the theory, but in practice it did not mean that Calvin was implacably opposed to bishops; it is well-known, for instance, that he accepted the existence of an episcopal system in the reformed Church of Poland!¹⁵ But it has to be said that among

[p.165]

Calvin's followers, what was desirable in principle had a way of becoming essential in practice, and the range of *adiaphora* was narrowed.¹⁶ Calvin's followers in England always regarded episcopacy as a compromise with the pre-Reformation past, to be removed as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

It is curious to note that Puritan logic in this matter was similar to that employed (to the opposite effect!) at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. In each case, what had originally been merely preferable became obligatory, and those who could not follow this development were excommunicated. Luther's attacks on 'tradition' were applied by the Puritans to the practices of the sub-Apostolic Church which had survived the original Reformation purge. A basically conservative church, like that of England, came under attack because it retained practices which had no clear scriptural warrant, even though the Bible did not condemn them either. The wearing of clerical robes, many features of the liturgy, and traditional practices like the blessing of the fields in spring, or the celebration of Christmas, were denounced as relics of paganism which had crept into the Church and corrupted its purity.

RICHARD HOOKER

It was against this situation that Richard Hooker reacted, and wrote a defence of tradition in his famous *Ecclesiastical Polity*. It would be too much to say that his view represented the official mind of the Church of England during the 1590s, when he was writing, but in the course of subsequent controversy, they gradually imposed themselves as the best statement of the conservative position in the church. Hooker never denied the need for the original Reformation, nor did he condemn Calvin for abandoning practices like episcopacy, since the situation in Geneva offered him little alternative. But Hooker was opposed to the idea of change merely for the sake of an abstract principle like *sola Scriptura*, and he thought that decency and order, as well as Christian charity and ecumenicity, demanded that the churches of Christendom be as much like each other as was reasonably possible.¹⁷ In other words, not simply the antiquity but also the universality of such things as infant baptism and episcopal Church government weighed heavily in their favour, and made the quest for an imaginary 'purity' (which had never in fact existed) seem not merely pointless, but mischievous.

¹⁵ R. S. Wallace, *op. cit.*, pp. 141-142.

¹⁶ 'Radical' pressure no doubt played an important part in this, especially in England, where there were many 'radical' elements among the Puritans.

¹⁷ R. Hooker, *op. cit.* IV, 13. His exact words are: 'It is true that the diversity of ceremonies ought not to cause the churches to dissent with one another; but yet it maketh most to avoiding of dissension, that there be amongst them an unity not only in doctrine, but also in ceremonies.'

The Continental Reformation took a different course mainly because there was no powerful Church establishment which could oppose the drift of the Reformers' teaching. In

[p.166]

Lutheran countries this was not really necessary, since Luther, as we have already seen, did not attack the ancient traditions of the Church. In Reformed countries other than England, the pre-Reformation Church establishment was destroyed, or at least so thoroughly reorganized that any meaningful continuity with the pre-Reformation set-up was broken. In England, where the church structures continued more or less as they had been before the time of Henry VIII, the *tabula rasa* approach of the Continental Calvinists was impossible, and led to conflict with those who sought to adopt it as practical policy.

But the failure of the radical Reformation to achieve its ends is perhaps best attested in their own communities. The closest modern descendants of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, the Amish or Hutterites, are noted for their extreme conservatism in every aspect of life, which has imposed a bondage to tradition far greater than anything the medieval church could ever have imagined. Those who have seen the film *The Witness* may recall the scene in which an Amish boy meets an old Hasidic Jew in a Philadelphia restroom. For a moment, each one thinks he has found another member of his own community a subtle reminder of the 'Judaistic' character of much modern Anabaptist traditionalism.¹⁸ The Amish represent an extreme, of course, but is useful to recall that they have reached that position from a starting point which was the exact opposite! In their different ways, other ecclesial communities of the left have had to come to terms with tradition, either by reverting to earlier 'Catholic' models, or by inventing their own, and enforcing them as 'denominational distinctives'.

No community can live without rules, and experience has shown that the Bible does not give enough guidance in this area for a viable church organization to function without supplementary procedures and practices. The real issue is whether and how these should be established and to what extent they are capable of being altered if circumstances require. The Reformers would have wanted maximum flexibility in this area, but sadly, their modern descendants have not always found it easy to live up to this ideal. However, the voice of experience would suggest that a church which changes gradually has a greater chance of being *semper reformanda* than one which razes everything to the ground and tries to replace the old structure with its version of the 'pure' New Testament ecclesia.

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¹⁸ And incidentally, a modern example of the ancient criticism of otiose traditions as 'Judaistic'.