

the heavens starting from one point take to return there. Thus, every time that, in the revolution of the sun, evening and morning occupy the world, their periodical succession never exceeds the space of one day.

But must we believe in a mysterious reason for this? God who made the nature of time measured it out and determined it by intervals of days; and, wishing to give it a week as a measure, he ordered the week to revolve from period to period upon itself, to count the movement of time, forming the week of one day revolving seven times upon itself: a proper circle begins and ends with itself. Such is also the character of eternity, to revolve upon itself and to end nowhere. If then the beginning of time is called 'one day' rather than 'the first day,' it is because Scripture wishes to establish its relationship with eternity. It was, in reality, fit and natural to call 'one' the day whose character is to be one wholly separated and isolated from all the others. If Scripture speaks to us of many ages, saying everywhere, 'age of age, and ages of ages,' we do not see it enumerate them as first, second, and third. It follows that we are hereby shown not so much limits, ends and succession of ages, as distinctions between various states and modes of action. 'The day of the Lord,' Scripture says, 'is great and very terrible,'<sup>11</sup> and elsewhere 'Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord: to what end is it for you? The day of the Lord is darkness and not light.'<sup>12</sup> A day of darkness for those who are worthy of darkness. No; this day without evening, without succession, and without end is not unknown to Scripture, and it is the day that the Psalmist calls the eighth day, because it is outside this time of weeks.<sup>13</sup> Thus whether you call it day, or whether you call it eternity, you express the same idea. Give this state the name of day; there are not several, but only one. If you call it eternity still it is unique and not manifold. Thus it is in order that you may carry your thoughts forward towards a future life, that Scripture marks by the word 'one' the day which is the type of eternity, the first

fruits of days, the contemporary of light, the holy Lord's day, honoured by the Resurrection of our Lord. 'And the evening and the morning were one day.'

But, whilst I am conversing with you about the first evening of the world, evening takes me by surprise, and puts an end to my discourse. May the Father of the true light, Who has adorned day with celestial light, Who has made the fire to shine which illuminates us during the night, Who reserves for us in the peace of a future age a spiritual and everlasting light, enlighten your hearts in the knowledge of truth, keep you from stumbling, and grant that 'you may walk honestly as in the day.'<sup>14</sup> Thus shall you shine as the sun in the midst of the glory of the saints, and I shall glory in you in the day of Christ, to Whom belong all glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.

### Footnotes

\*Schaff, P. & Wace, H., *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* Vol. 8, pp. 58–65.

1 Gen. 1. 2, LXX.

2 Gen. 2. 5, 'every herb of the field *before it grew*.' There seems here an indication of the actual creation, ποιησις, being in the mind of God.

3 cf. Heb. 1. 14.

4 Prov. 13. 9, LXX.

5 Col. 1. 12.

6 cf. Matt. 22. 13.

7 Gen. 1.4.

8 Gen. 1. 5.

9 Joel 2. 11.

10 Amos 5. 18.

11 The argument here is due to a misapprehension of the meaning of the term *eighth* in Psalm 6, and 11, title.

12 Rom. 13. 13.

13 Ps. 119. 103.

14 Gen. 1. 6.

## Tradition in 2 Timothy

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Evangelicals often feel an instinctive hostility to the notion of 'tradition'. In the popular Protestant mind, an extreme antithesis between tradition and Scripture operates, sometimes in very irrational ways. After all, how does the average Evangelical know that his translation of Scripture is reliable, except that he has an Evangelical tradition of scholarship which assures him it is? Tra-

dition in some form is inescapable. Moreover, if we define tradition as the accumulated wisdom of the past, the church's treasure-store of 2,000 years of reflection on the meaning of Scripture, can any sane or humble person afford to ignore it? Is it really honouring to the Holy Spirit to think that I can sit down by myself with a Bible, and the Spirit will then teach me everything in

splendid isolation? In all normal circumstances, the presumption would be arrogant. The humility of the Ethiopian eunuch is more wholesome (Acts 8:30–31). Scripture itself teaches that the ascended Christ instructs his people through Spirit-equipped teachers (Eph. 4:7–16).

Paul's second letter to Timothy offers us a Scriptural springboard into a more positive assessment for the role of tradition in the life of the church. This is the letter which contains the classic statement about the inspiration of Scripture, so highly prized by Evangelicals (2 Tim. 3:15–17). But the same letter also speaks affirmatively of tradition. Let us begin with 2 Timothy 1:13, where Paul writes:

Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus (NASB).

'Standard' here is ὑποτυπωσις, literally a sketch or outline, used metaphorically to mean a pattern or definitive example. Paul uses the same word in a different context in 1 Timothy 1:16:

For this reason I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate his perfect patience, as an example (ὑποτυπωσις) for those who would believe in him for eternal life (NASB).

Paul's conversion from 'a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor' (1 Tim. 1:13, NASB) is the standard, the pattern, the definitive example, of what the grace of Christ can accomplish in sinners. We gaze at the pattern, marvel at what Christ can do, and banish despair over ourselves or others. A similar standard, pattern and definitive example is found, says Paul, in the 'sound words' which Timothy has heard from Paul. These 'sound' (healthy, spiritually hygienic) words, Timothy is to hold fast as a public teacher in the church. John Calvin comments:

My own view is that the apostle is telling Timothy to hold fast the doctrine he has learnt, not only in its substance but in the very form of its expression. For ὑποτυπωσις, the word used here, means a vivid picture, as if the object concerned were actually before our eyes. Paul knows how prone men are to rebel and fall away from true doctrine, and for this reason carefully warns Timothy not to depart from the form of teaching which he has received, and to regulate his method of teaching by the rule laid down for him — not that we should be unduly scrupulous over words, but it is exceedingly harmful to corrupt doctrine even in the smallest degree (Calvin's commentary on 2 Timothy 1:13).

Then comes the crucial transition in Paul's argument. In 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul writes:

The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (NASB).

Timothy is not only to hold fast the ὑποτυπωσις of sound words himself; he is to entrust it to others, to 'faithful men', who in their turn 'will be able to teach others also'. 'Entrust' here is παρατιθημι, to deposit with another, commit into someone else's keeping. Timothy must entrust, deposit and commit the Pauline pattern of sound words into the care of 'faithful' men. 'Faithful' could mean simply 'believing'; but given the specific charge here in view, it would make better sense to think that Paul is exhorting Timothy to entrust the pattern not just to believing men, but to reliable and trustworthy ones, men who will faithfully guard and transmit the apostolic deposit. A man may be a believer and yet not measure up to this high calling, through weakness of character or poor understanding of the sound words. He must be a reliable, dependable, trustworthy believer.

Albert Barnes comments:

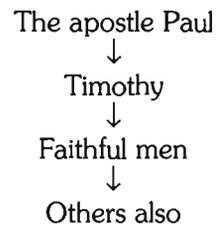
The reference is undoubtedly to ordination to the ministerial office. Timothy was to see that those only were admitted to the ministry who were qualified to understand the truths of religion, and to communicate them to others. This is a clear warrant for ministers to set apart others to the same sacred office. . . .

However, Barnes then emphatically repeats the proviso:

There is, doubtless, to be a 'succession' of ministers in the church; but the true succession is to be found in good men who are qualified to teach, and who have the Spirit of Christ, and not merely in those who have been ordained (Barnes' commentary on 2 Timothy 2:2).

Mere ordination by itself supplies no automatic guarantees. Those ordained must be faithful Spirit-filled teachers of the sound words.

So then, we have here a sort of apostolic succession of sound teaching:



Lest the reader misunderstand, I am not arguing that such a chain of unbroken faithful tradition has *in fact* characterized the visible church universal, from the apostles through every century up to the present day.

Paul is setting down what ought to be, not what necessarily is. The Lord's promise in Matthew 16:18 requires that there shall always unfailingly be a succession of true believers on earth, but not therefore inevitably a pure visible church, free from the least taint of doctrinal error. We may take Old Testament Judah as a model. Judah was by no means collectively indefectible in adhering to the Torah. But God always graciously ensured the continuing presence of true believers in Judah, an 'Israel within Israel', even in periods of darkest apostasy. Indeed, some of the true believers were themselves tainted with degrees of apostasy (e.g. Joash and Amaziah, 2 Kings 12:1-3; 14:1-4). And there were times when Judah lived in mysterious corporate ignorance of God's written Word (2 Kings 22-23—Hilkiah's discovery of the Pentateuch lying neglected in the temple, and the subsequent 'Reformation' enacted by godly king Josiah). The history of the New Testament Church from apostolic times to today looks remarkably similar.<sup>1</sup>

I am therefore arguing that Paul is telling us how churches *ought* to function. There ought to be a tradition, a transmission, of the pattern of sound words, from one generation to the next, through a succession of faithful teachers. An example from the patristic era is the apostle John's teaching being handed on to Polycarp of Smyrna, who in turn handed it on to Irenaeus of Lyons. In the words of Irenaeus:

I can tell the very place in which the blessed Polycarp used to sit when he preached his sermons, how he came in and went out, the manner of his life, what he looked like, the sermons he delivered to the people, and how he used to report his association with John and the others who had seen the Lord, how he would relate their words, and the things concerning the Lord he had heard from them, about His miracles and teachings. Polycarp had received all this from eyewitnesses of the Word of life, and related all these things in accordance with the Scriptures. I listened eagerly to these things at the time, by God's mercy which was bestowed on me, and I made notes of them, not on paper, but in my heart, and constantly by the grace of God I meditate on them faithfully (Irenaeus's *Letter to Florinus*, preserved in Eusebius's *History of the Church*, Book 5, chapter 20).

Whether we instinctively like it or not, this process of conserving the 'pattern of sound words' in the church through a succession of 'faithful men' goes significantly beyond a simplistic 'Bible only' position. If it is working properly, it necessarily involves publicly *interpreting* the Bible, and *transmitting* the interpreted Bible via *oral teaching and creeds*. An uninterpreted Bible is a nonsense. The very act of attributing the status 'Bible' to a written corpus involves a serious act of interpretation, viz. of the canon of Scripture—which books

constitute the 'Bible'? Further, the preaching and teaching ministry is by its very nature one of publicly *interpreting* Scripture. It may sound pious to say, 'I want to know what God has said, not what the Revd. Smith thinks God meant.' But such 'piety' would reduce the minister to reading out the Scriptures and then immediately sitting down again! Preaching requires interpretation, comment, exposition, application.

At one level, it is every Christian's duty and privilege to engage in such acts of interpretation and teaching. Scripture itself indicates this in such passages as Acts 17:11 and 1 John 2:18-27. It also follows from the 'priesthood of all believers' (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). One of the chief duties of the Aaronic priesthood was to teach the Law (Deut. 31:9-13; 33:10; Jer. 2:8; Hos. 4:4-6; Mic. 3:11); in a general sense, this now becomes the function of all New Covenant believers through the universal gift of the indwelling Spirit, who operates as our anointing to priesthood. However, to the Christian who is called to the public ministry the responsibility more especially falls to study, interpret and teach the Scriptures, 'accurately handling the word of truth' (2 Tim. 2:15). He is the exalted Christ's special gift to his church as a teacher (Eph. 4:11). Here, then, is a line of continuity from the Aaronic priesthood to the Christian ministry: the sacred trust of publicly interpreting God's Word passes from the Old Testament priests to the New Testament presbyters in particular. To Timothy the preacher, then, and to his ministerial successors, Paul especially commits the task of preserving and transmitting the pattern of sound words. Therefore if the teaching presbyters are obeying 2 Timothy 2:2, the preaching will constitute a process of oral tradition in the historical life of the church, by which the pattern of sound words is handed on from one generation to its successor. From the well-taught congregation will emerge the 'faithful men' who will be able to teach the next generation also.

From this seed grows naturally the phenomenon of creeds and confessions of faith as *written* tradition. Just as the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ assumed a final written form in the Gospels, so our interpretation of the written Word takes, by analogy, the same form. Under the guidance of its teaching presbyters, it is both lawful and beneficial for the local church to commit to writing its summary understanding of Scripture. Historically this is certainly what the early church did; each congregation had its *regula fidei*, its 'rule of faith', which epitomized its interpretation of the apostolic preaching. The most famous 'rule' was that of the Roman congregation, which became finalized as the 'Apostles' Creed', used in baptismal services. Later the Nicene Creed was integrated into the eucharist and recited by the whole congregation (another good idea which adds force to the public transmission of the faith).

There are many advantages to this setting down in

credal form of a church's understanding of Scripture. If we think of the practical process involved in *guarding* the pattern of sound words, and *transmitting* it from one generation to the next, this becomes much easier if a church has a definite creed. The church's accepted standard of teaching, rather than floating nebulously in the mind of whoever happens to be the minister, then has an objective public form which can be circulated, consulted, appealed to. The fact is that every preacher has an *unwritten* creed. So does every congregation in its collective mind. It is better for the church's state of mind to have the creed openly put into writing. It provides greater doctrinal stability. If a church does materially change its theology, it will at least do so with due deliberation and care when such a change involves altering its public creed. Better this, surely, than having a pope in the pulpit whose unobserved doctrinal mutations might overthrow next year what he promulgated last year?

A written creed also makes it easier to *detect error*. In the early Church, Arius subscribed to every Scriptural verse about the deity of Christ; he simply put his own gloss on its meaning. But when the Council of Nicaea drew up its extra-Scriptural Creed, and declared its *interpretation* of Scripture to be that the Son is *homocousios* with the Father, 'light from light, true God from true God', then Arius faltered, refusing to subscribe. The very fact that the Creed was *not* Scripture exposed Arius' error. Which professed Bible-believing Christian would refuse to subscribe to the Bible? But presented with a 'human interpretation' of the Bible, Arius would not sign, because it manifestly contradicted *his* interpretation. Creeds, precisely because they are not verbally inspired by God, can do what the very Bible cannot, *i.e.* expose heresy by making clear the difference between true and false interpretations of the Bible. Does a church have the right to do this? More than the 'right', it has the *responsibility to Christ*. How else can a church preserve the pattern of sound words against the Scripture-twisters? Unless it wishes to fall into theological anarchy (contravening 1 Corinthians 1:10), every church must say to any would-be Arius, 'No, Scripture means *this*, not *that*, and if you persevere in disagreeing, out you must go.'

So then, Paul's command to Timothy to 'retain the standard of sound words' and 'entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also', validates a form of tradition in the life of the church. We have as lawful tradition the oral preaching of the church, the public interpretation of Scripture, whereby God intends the pattern of sound words to be disseminated and transmitted from one generation to the next. And we have written creeds and confessions, which facilitate the same process.

Classic Reformation Protestantism has always acknowledged this subordinate authority of tradition. Francis Turretin, greatest of the 17th century Reformed systematic theologians, put it like this when discussing creeds and confessions:

To this power [of the Church in doctrinal judgment] belongs the making of public creeds and confessions. . . . to preserve the unity and agreement of faith and reject errors. They do not have the same authority as the Scriptures, since they must be compared with and corrected by them. Yet they have even their own memorable weight and ought to be valued very highly by the pious. Both because they contain the sum and foundation of the Christian doctrine, and are like barriers against the errors and corruptions which can injure religion. And because they are bonds of ecclesiastical communion and formulas of consent, which testify of the unity of faith and the agreement of churches with each other and are distinguished from unbelievers, as soldiers by marks or watchwords from their enemies. Such formerly was the Apostles' Creed, which was made in the beginning of Christianity. . . . *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, topic 18, question 30).

Such was the received wisdom of the Reformed faith before the disintegrative effects of subjectivism and individualism which the Enlightenment unleashed, and which today often pass as Evangelical piety. However, Turretin is surely closer to the spirit and letter of the apostle Paul in 2 Timothy. Perhaps it is time for us to reconsider the Scriptural doctrine of tradition?

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### Footnotes

1. The darker periods of Judah's history, when there were nonetheless true believers, even if they themselves were 'tainted', may help some of us to a better understanding of those periods in church history when we are tempted to think that Matthew 16:18 had not been fulfilled. Perhaps we could think of some of the great medieval saints like Anselm of Canterbury and Bernard of Clairvaux as analogous to Old Testament figures like Joash and Amaziah who 'did right in the sight of the LORD, only the high places were not taken away'.