

## How Do We Decide? Tradition and Church Authority

### Overview

A major characteristic of our 21<sup>st</sup> century culture of relativism is a belief in the right to have our own ideas and make up our own minds. In fact, we even have the assumed right to change our minds on a whim to fit the circumstances. In our postmodern world, we tend to disrespect those who believe in absolute truth. But should these beliefs and values carry over to our relationship with Christ? What *is* God's plan?

Early believers faced similar struggles. Soon after the ascension of Christ, competing claims for truth abounded. Since there was no universally accepted body of scripture other than the Hebrew text, the Old Testament, early church leaders sought to eliminate the confusion.

In this issue and the next, we will explore some of the significant challenges the church faced during this period and how these challenges were addressed:

- How should believers determine the real gospel message?
- What should be the role of tradition in making these determinations?
- What authority does church leadership have in making these determinations?
- On what authority, if any, should religious leaders establish doctrine?

### Understanding the Setting

100	
101	Death of Clement of Rome (he articulated line of apostolic succession)
113	Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, describes roles of bishops, elders and deacons
150	Language of Apostle's Creed develops
175-80	Celsus writes <i>A Discourse Against the Christians</i>
177	Irenaeus becomes bishop, writes <i>Against Heresies</i> against Gnosticism
185-254	Origen—writes <i>Against Celsus</i>
200	
249-58	Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, argues baptism should only be administered by the organized church

## Step 1: Grasp the Issue

### Sound Bites

“It is up to each believer to decide for himself what is the truth.”

“Truth can only be found from Scripture as interpreted by the teachings of the church.”

“The New Testament church should be the pattern for all churches. All this other tradition is just human and should be eliminated.”

“Although the apostles certainly served as a sort of loose organization focus, the notion of organizational unity was a secondary consideration...The primary focus was in fact on relational unity around a core set of shared beliefs.” – Rex Koivisto

“Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”

### Case Study

When a young woman named Jennifer moved into the townhouse next door, Mary offered to help in any way she could. The two women hit it off, though more than thirty years separated their ages. Jennifer seemed to appreciate Mary’s help in choosing curtains and planting flowers, and they fell into the habit of taking walks together in the evening. On one of these walks Mary found it natural to mention how her study in 1 Corinthians 15 had been comforting to her in accepting the death of her husband, who had died the previous year.

“I think that’s totally great for you,” said Jennifer. “I can see how believing in resurrection could make you feel better.”

“Do you believe in life after death?” asked Mary.

“Sure. I mean, I’m mostly into reincarnation myself. But resurrection, that’s cool too.”

Mary was puzzled, not sure what Jennifer really believed. “The Bible teaches resurrection. Don’t you agree?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s what they said back when I went to Sunday school. And the Bible’s what you believe in, evidently so that’s why I think this resurrection thing is so great for you.”

Mary had to ponder this on the way home. She had been a Christian since childhood and had mostly associated with Christians. Frankly, it shocked her to realize that Jennifer

apparently believed the Bible was true *for her* but not necessarily true for everybody. And if Jennifer didn't accept the Bible, where did she get her ideas, such as that half-baked belief in reincarnation?<sup>1</sup>

Jennifer's beliefs are by no means rare or unusual. In fact, they are similar to the beliefs held by the majority of people in our present-day culture. If you were Mary, how would you respond to Jennifer?

**What are some questions we need to explore as we seek to gain a better understanding of this issue?**

---

<sup>1</sup>An excerpt from Chapter 2 of *Our Legacy* by John Hannah. Copyright © 2001. Permission pending, NavPress. All rights reserved.

# Tradition and Church Authority

## Step 2: Study the Scriptures

### Acts 15:1-2, 6, 12-15, 19, 22, 30-31

An early church crisis at Jerusalem gives indications of how the church leaders resolved conflict. The point of debate was the need for Gentile Christians to follow the Jewish law. As you may recall, this council (approximately AD 49) met after Paul and Barnabas completed their first missionary journey.

- How did the early believers resolve this conflict? Who made the decisions?
- What approach did they use? A vote? Consensus? Relinquish to authority?
- What sources did they use to support their arguments? Try to identify as many as you can. Do we use these today?
- How was the final decision enforced? What effect did it have?

### Acts 1:21-26

Leadership roles became increasingly defined in the early church, with primary authority resting with the apostles.

- What were the qualifications for being an apostle?

## **2 Timothy 1:13-14; 2:2, 3:14**

In Paul's last correspondence with his young protégé, Timothy, he emphasizes the importance of heeding those who had gone before him, as well as passing on to others the things that he had learned.

In v. 14 of chapter one, Paul refers to the sound teaching that he passed on to Timothy as "the sound deposit."

- What might Paul have been trying to communicate with this metaphor?
- How does Paul envision truth being passed on and protected for future generations (v. 2)?
- What safeguard does he provide to help ensure the integrity of the process of passing on the truth (v. 2)?
- What was one reason Paul said Timothy should be confident in continuing in the teaching which he had learned (3:14)?

## Step 3: Consult Other Sources

The early church would be led by those who walked with Jesus, his disciplines (now called the apostles). But for the next century, how would they decide what was true and reliable? Reading 1 identifies the three major sources of authority that early believers used in answering this question. Reading 2 describes the work of one of the earliest defenders of the faith, Irenaeus, against a false version of Christianity called Gnosticism. Reading 3 lets us hear from Irenaeus himself. Finally, Reading 4 helps us understand the roots of an important but divisive concept – apostolic succession.

As you consult these sources, on these questions: What key elements did the early church use as its basis for authority? What did the word “tradition” mean for these early believers? How did it relate to the authority of scripture? What is meant by apostolic succession and why was it so important?

“The Church Fathers and Authority,” by John Hannah.

Excerpt from chapter two of *Our Legacy*. Copyright © 2001. Permission pending, NavPress. All rights reserved.

“Irenaeus and the Heretics,” by D. Jeffrey Bingham.

Excerpt from chapter one of *Pocket History of the Church*. Copyright © 2002 by D. Jeffrey Bingham. Permission pending, InterVarsity Press. All rights reserved.

“The Apostolic Tradition,” by Irenaeus.

Excerpts from *Against Heresies* 3.2-5, trans. Cyril H. Richardson, in *Early Christian Fathers*. Copyright © 1953. Permission pending, The Westminster Press. All rights reserved.

“The Tradition and Traditions,” by D. H. Williams.

Excerpt from chapter one of *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism*. Copyright © 1999. Permission pending, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

## The Church Fathers and Authority

by John Hannah

Three sources of authority seem to have been recognized in the early church, though it must be remembered that there was no universal opinion. While the church of our Lord can be referred to as a collective singularity, as in a passage like Philippians 3:6, conformity of practice and teaching among the churches at this time was lacking. The development of doctrine arises out of cultural and ecclesiastical circumstances, either questions put to the church by its members or threats posed to it by its adversaries. This insight is important in making the point that the church of the second century appears to have been without significant external or internal travail—a circumstance that would prove to be temporary. Perhaps this situation of relative comfort prevailed in the second century due to the insignificant size and influence of the church within the Roman Empire. At any rate, without a strong impulse propelling the church to defend and declare itself in the realm of authority, there is little evidence of reflection in these matters.

The documents from this period suggest several things. First, reflective of the Jewish heritage of the church, the writers of the period understood the Old Testament books to be authoritative, though the exact number of the books in that canon is unclear. This can be illustrated by the quotation formulas employed by the writers in the early-church period. Before Old Testament allusions or quotations, such prefaces as “For He [the Creator] says . . .,” “For the holy writings say . . .,” “For thus it is written . . .,” “For thus says God . . .,” and “For the Scripture says . . .” are common.

Second, relative to the New Testament books, these earliest writers did not conceive of them as they did of the Old Testament ones. A concept of the presence of new authoritative books was grasped even in the late first century (2 Peter 3:15-16), but there seems to have been no idea of their equality with the Old Testament; on this issue there is complete silence. Certain of the writings of the apostles were highly regarded and used, as evidenced, for example, by Clement of Rome’s view of Paul’s letters to Corinth. Many of the apostolic books were circular letters to various churches, or were written to certain individuals, and thus may not have been known throughout the churches in the empire. Of the twenty-seven books that were later collected as the New Testament, the Fathers allude to nineteen of them (the excepted ones being Luke, Colossians, Philemon, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation). These writers seem also to have had a high regard for certain writers or writings of their own era along with the apostolic writings. This is particularly true of *The Shepherd of Hermas* (which is referred to by its writer as a revelation), the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Didache*, and *1 Clement*. Perhaps the best judgment on this issue is that the earliest Fathers of the church did not have a precipitating cause that motivated them to reflect on the extent of authority; the issue was simply not raised.

Second, the earliest Fathers considered tradition to be authoritative. In the early church, tradition was understood to be the oral articulation of the gospel, just as the sacred books were the literary expression of it. In this

## Tradition and Church Authority

sense tradition and Scripture, though in different forms of communication, are the same. Both the sacred writings and the word-of-mouth communication of the Christian message were the “Word of God.” The authority was not the medium through which the message was communicated; the authority was the message communicated! Tradition is simply the oral presentation of the gospel. The means of understanding the gospel in a world of vast illiteracy was not the written word but the spoken word. However, the spoken word—tradition—was always in conformity with the Old Testament revelation and the teaching of the apostles; there was no oral tradition that stood in contrast with the written revelation of God.

Third, the earliest Fathers placed authority in the leadership of the church. Particularly is this evident with the rise of the bishop’s office in the East and of apostolic succession in the West.

In the Eastern churches, as is clearly evident in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch (c.35-c. 107), there was in many areas a shift from a plurality of leadership to the emergence of a single leader in each of the churches. The message spoken by the bishop was a bulwark against false teaching. Truth was not so much related to an ecclesiastical office or officeholder as it was related to the fact that the officeholder was standing in a line of succession with the apostles. Along with the written word and the oral word (tradition), the bishop was a faithful witness to the gospel. Those who did not have access to the sacred books, and yet embraced the message orally communicated to them, had a shelter of

protection and comfort, their trusted pastor/bishop.

A similar line of authority arose in the West, articulated initially by Clement of Rome (d. 101?). Though he was not aware of the practice of having a single leader in each of the churches (the terms “elder” and “bishop” being conceived of as interchangeable terms; see Acts 20:28 and Titus 1:1,7), as was the emerging custom in the East, Clement did advocate the concept of an apostolic succession in the churches. That is, the plural leadership in the Roman church—the body of presbyters—was viewed as being in direct lineage from the apostles, who gained their authority through Christ. Apostolic succession was not so much the notion of an unbroken sequence of leaders in the churches as it was the continuation of the gospel message in the churches preserved by faithful leaders (2 Timothy 2:2). The theory can be rather simply expressed: God the Father sent Christ, His Son, into the world; Christ sent His apostles into the world; and the apostles have their successors as well. The lineal succession through the office of leadership was a proof that the presbyters were proclaiming the message of God; there was a seamless garment of truth throughout the decades in the churches. Thus, each church conceived of itself as being part of a genealogical tree whose root was God, whose trunk was Christ, whose major branches were the apostles, and whose lesser branches were the leaders of each of the churches in succession.





## Irenaeus and the Heretics

by D. Jeffrey Bingham

**A**round 180, Irenaeus wrote five books against the heresies that were threatening his people. The most prevalent heresy was Gnosticism. The Gnostics taught that salvation was based on a secret knowledge to which only they were privy. These false teachers were seducing members of Irenaeus's parish.

Come back with me to a marketplace in the center of the ancient city of Lugdunum, Gaul (now called Lyon, France). You and your spouse are shopping for fresh vegetables, the fish catch of the day and some oil for your household lamps. As you pause before the tomatoes and carrots displayed by the merchant Cletus, his nephew Marcus, a confessing Christian not part of Irenaeus's congregation, engages you in conversation. "So, I understand that you two regard yourselves as believers in Christ," he says with a smile.

"Yes," you respond. "We follow the teachings of our bishop, Irenaeus."

"Oh," he says sharply. "I'm a believer in Christ, who came to us in Jesus from the Father in order to reveal the truth about God to us. Is this what your community believes?"

"Yes, of course," you insist. "We're Christians."

"Well, I am not sure that Irenaeus has told you everything that's involved in truly being Christian."

You look at him curiously and ask, "What do you mean, 'not everything'? We believe exactly what you said you believe!"

"Oh, really," he replies with a smirk. "Let's go somewhere where we can talk—shall we?—and let me explain exactly what I

believe and what your 'trustworthy' bishop Irenaeus is keeping from you. He wants to control you and prevent you from having what he can't have."

You follow Marcus through a dark doorway behind the vegetable stand where he begins to explain his "Christian" faith. When he finishes, you and your spouse are stunned. You look at each other open-mouthed. He had used the Old Testament and the writings of the Evangelists and Paul. He had spoken with such conviction and sincerity. He had used all the phrases, catchwords and Bible verses that you hear at your Lord's Supper and Scripture reading services. But although he sounded just like you, he hadn't meant the same thing. You and your spouse, having been under Irenaeus's teaching for several years, quickly thank Marcus and leave without another word. The newly baptized couple from your congregation who arrive at the vegetable stand as you leave, however, will not be as fortunate. Following is what Marcus the Gnostic had explained to you. It is one version of various forms of the Gnostic myth.

The "Father" whom Marcus had spoken of was the eternal, unknowable, spiritual, supreme deity. This Father had issued forth from himself spiritual beings known as Aeons. They had names like "Christ," "Logos," "Savior" and "Sophia." At some point "Sophia" decided inappropriately, with pride and arrogance, that she could and would arrive at a knowledge of the unknowable, highest Father. Her pride and arrogance resulted in her begetting another being named Yaldabaoth, who was known as the Demiurge, or Creator. He inherited his mother's faults of sin, pride,

## Tradition and Church Authority

arrogance and evil. It was this being, not the highest Father, who created the physical world. For Marcus, then, the Creator—the God of the Old Testament, Yahweh of Israel—is *not* the supreme Father. He is an evil, arrogant, lower being. When he explained a prophetic passage such as Isaiah 46:9, in which God announced his exclusivity by saying, “I am God and there is no other,” Marcus said this was the Demiurge pridefully asserting his uniqueness out of ignorance of the true Father. As a consequence the material world created by the Demiurge has the characteristics of the Creator. Everything physical, the earth and particularly the human body, is seen as evil, bad, even putrid.

Marcus then explained that there was an attempt by the good spiritual beings to correct the perversion of the creation of a physical world. But Yaldabaoth was able to capture some of the heavenly, spiritual elements and hold them captive within some *bad* physical bodies. Marcus called these spiritual elements “seeds of light,” “the inner person,” or most often, “the spirits.” “So,” Marcus had summarized, “*some* human bodies, putrid as they are, house the only valuable eternal element we call the spirit. There are two kinds of humans: those who have the seed or spirit (the elect) and those who don’t. The ultimate goal, what I regard as *salvation*, is the release of the *real me*, my *spirit*, from my worthless body so that I can ascend back to the spiritual world. Ultimate salvation is my spirit flying away from this shell, this tomb, of the body.”

“I suppose you are interested in how one can be saved,” he asked slyly. Both of you had nodded yes, with eyes big as saucers. “Well, I believe that the spiritual being ‘Christ’ came from the Father to redeem the spirits imprisoned by the wicked Creator. He did this by revealing the true knowledge of the

Father to us. Now, this ‘Christ’ being could not, of course, become a human, because that would entail having a putrid body. So either he merely appeared to be human or he simply indwelt a human named ‘Jesus’ by adopting him as his ‘carrier,’ his vehicle. So, you see, there are really two and not one. There is the human being, Jesus’ (or merely the appearance of a human) and the spiritual being, ‘Christ.’ This Christ revealed to his disciples the *knowledge* that the Creator of the Old Testament is *not* the true God. The true God is the Father of Christ. It is this knowledge that saves and that releases my spirit from my body.”

Such Gnostic theology was quite prominent in the second century and was a serious threat to the church. It employed the language of Christianity to develop its system of belief. In essence it was *dualistic*. That is, it assigned extreme, opposite values to differing realities and utterly distinguished things that the Bible holds together: Spirit is good, but the body and other physical things are bad; the spiritual Father is the true, good God, but the Creator is a bad impostor; the spirit Christ is the true Savior, but the human Jesus is only a shell; elect humans are good, but other humans are dispensable; the New Testament is the good news of salvation, but the Old Testament is a record of false religion.

One tricky thing about Gnostics, Irenaeus thought, was that before they explained their system they *sounded* so orthodox, so biblical. Referring to Jesus’ warning about false prophets in Matthew 7:15, Irenaeus frequently thought of them as “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” He wrote, “Such men are to outward appearance sheep; for they appear to be like us by what they say in public, repeating the same words as we do;

but inwardly they are wolves.”<sup>1</sup> He described them as those who have mixed up a poison and passed it off as a refreshing drink.<sup>2</sup>

The other tricky thing about Gnostics, for Irenaeus, was that they used the Scriptures to support their system. But *using* the Scripture, he pointed out, meant nothing. Anyone can use the Bible to support his or her position. Anyone can manipulate the Scriptures in an attempt to make them fit his or her views. All you need to do is pay attention to some parts, ignore other parts, take a sentence or a word here, connect that to a sentence or word there, and you have rewritten Scripture into a pattern that fits what you want it to say.

Irenaeus opposed the Gnostics by explaining to his Christian community the proper “fit” of Scripture in light of the traditional teachings of the church passed down from the apostles to the bishops. Irenaeus taught his congregation what the church had taught before the Gnostics showed up. He appreciated the strength that resulted from a healthy union between Scripture and tradition. The interpretation of Scripture passed down by the apostles and preserved by the bishops was a safeguard in the face of heretics who also appealed to Scripture. The issue brought to the foreground by the Gnostics was that anybody can appeal to Scripture. Anybody can “use” the Bible, but the question is, how are they interpreting the Bible?

Against the dualistic theology of the Gnostics, Irenaeus emphasized several doctrines. First, there exists only one God, who is both the Creator, the God of the Old Testament, and the Father of Jesus Christ.

<sup>1</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies” 3.16.8, trans. A. Roberts and W. H. Rambaut, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, Anti-Nicene Fathers 1, p. 443.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.17.4.

Second, Jesus is the incarnate, eternal Son and Word of the Father. Third, although there is some difference between the Old and New Testaments (before and after the incarnation), they are both parts of the one history of redemption. Fourth, since the Father, through his Son, is the Creator of the physical body and of the earth, the physical world has value. The body will be raised incorruptible and reunited with the immaterial part of the human (spirit, soul), and the earth, purified by fire, will be refashioned or renewed. Fifth, there is only one humanity, all of which is fallen and in need of redemption. There is no elitism in humanity, such as a distinction between the “spiritual ones” of the Father and the “material ones” of the Creator. Redemption is accomplished by the eternal Son of God, who became human and thereby through his incarnation united God with humanity. Jesus Christ as God *who is human* introduces into humanity’s sad, decaying history a hope for humanity’s immortality. As “the last Adam,” Christ began a new line of humanity destined for eternal glory, and he reversed the cause and effect of the first Adam.

Most pointedly, what distinguished Irenaeus from the heretics was his theme of unity and his commitment to interpreting Scripture within the parameters of the faith passed down from apostle to bishop. What has been entrusted from one faithful Christian to another always plays an important role in interpretation.

To Irenaeus, tradition was an important source of information on what the Bible taught. It’s not strange that we find the Bible itself speaking about the importance of heeding those faithful ones who have gone before us and passing on to others what we receive. Four times Paul wrote about this to Timothy:

## Tradition and Church Authority

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith. (1 Tim 6:20-21)

What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. (2 Tim 1:13-14)

The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. (2 Tim 2:2)

Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it. (2 Tim 3:14)

As we saw in Gnosticism, some people exploit Scripture for their own ends. Therefore, what faithful Christians through the years have been saying Scripture means can be helpful in preventing our own misinterpretations. In Irenaeus’s day the central function of church leaders was to

explain what the prophets, the Lord and the apostles had meant by what they had said. What Scripture said was given a formal interpretation, which set the apostolic teaching apart from that of the heretics. Anybody, it had become clear, could *say* they believed in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior sent by the Father. But what did they *mean* by terms like “Jesus Christ” “personal Savior” and “Father”? Church leaders like Irenaeus explained the ways those words and phrases were to be understood properly. I like what Martin Marty says about Gnosticism: “Fusing a pagan ancestry with Christian deviations, it knew many of the words but little of the music of the song of Christian redemption.”<sup>3</sup>



---

<sup>3</sup> M. E. Marty, *A Short History of Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 57.

## The Apostolic Tradition

by Irenaeus

**B**ut when we appeal again to that tradition which has come down from the apostles and is guarded by the successions of elders<sup>1</sup> in the churches, they oppose the tradition, saying that they are wiser not only than the elders, but even than the apostles, and have found the genuine truth. For the apostles [they say] mixed matters of the Law with the words of the Saviour, and not only the apostles, but even the Lord himself, spoke sometimes from the Demiurge, sometimes from the middle power, sometimes from the highest, while they know the hidden mystery without doubt or corruption, and in its purity. This is in nothing less than shameless blasphemy against their Maker. What it comes to is that they will not agree with either Scripture or tradition. It is such people, my dear friend, that we have to fight with, who like slippery snakes are always trying to escape us. Therefore we must resist them on all sides, hoping that by cutting off their escape we may be able to bring them to turn to the truth. For although it is not easy for a soul which has been seized by error to turn back, still it is not absolutely impossible to put error to flight by putting the truth beside it.<sup>2</sup>

The tradition of the apostles, made clear in all the world, can be clearly seen in every church by those who wish to behold the truth. We can enumerate those who were established by the apostles as bishops in the churches, and their successors down to our time, none of

whom taught or thought of anything like their mad ideas. Even if the apostles had known of hidden mysteries, which they taught to the perfect secretly and apart from others, they would have handed them down especially to those to whom they were entrusting the churches themselves. For they certainly wished those whom they were leaving as their successors, handing over to them their own teaching position, to be perfect and irreproachable, since their sound conduct would be a great benefit [to the Church], and failure on their part the greatest calamity. . . .

Similarly Polycarp, who not only was taught by apostles, and associated with many who had seen Christ, but was installed by apostles for Asia, as bishop in the church in Smyrna—I saw him myself in my early youth—survived for a long time, and departed this life in a ripe old age by a glorious and magnificent martyrdom. He always taught what he learned from the apostles, which the Church continues to hand on, and which are the only truths. The churches in Asia all bear witness to this, as do those who have succeeded Polycarp down to the present time; he is certainly a much more trustworthy and dependable witness than Valentinus and Marcion and the other false thinkers. . . .

Since there are so many clear testimonies, we should not seek from others for the truth which can easily be received from the Church. There the apostles, like a rich man making a deposit, fully bestowed upon her all that belongs to the truth, so that whoever wishes may receive from her the water of life. She is the entrance to life; all the others are thieves

<sup>1</sup> *Presbuteroi* in Irenaeus are sometimes holders of an office in the Church, but often, as probably here, the grand old men who were links in the chain of tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Apparently a citation of Justin, *Apol. I*, ch. 12, *fin*.

---

## Tradition and Church Authority

---

and robbers.<sup>3</sup> Therefore we ought to avoid them, but to love with the greatest zeal the things of the Church, and so to lay hold of the tradition of the truth. What if there should be a dispute about some matter of moderate importance? Should we not turn to the oldest churches, where the apostles themselves were known, and find out from them the clear and certain answer to the problem now being raised? Even if the apostles had not left their Writings to us, ought we not to follow the rule of the tradition which they handed down to those to whom they committed the churches? Many barbarian peoples who believe in Christ follow this rule, having [the message of their]

salvation written in their hearts by the Spirit without paper and ink. Diligently following the old tradition, they believe in one God, maker of heaven and earth and of all that is in them, through Christ Jesus the Son of God, who on account of his abundant love for his creation submitted to be born of a virgin, himself by himself uniting man to God, and having suffered under Pontius Pilate, and risen, and having been received up into splendor, is to come in glory as the Saviour of those who are saved, and the judge of those who are judged, and will send into eternal fire those who alter the truth, and despise his coming. . . .



---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rev. 22:17; John 10:7, 8.

## The Tradition and Traditions

by D. H. Williams

When it comes to understanding the ecclesiastical concept of “tradition,” perhaps the biggest difficulty is the tendency to confuse it with “traditionalism.” In my undergraduate classes on early Christianity, this is the first misperception that I try to divest from my students’ thinking. Most of them imagine that “tradition” has to do with former ways of doing things that have become honored simply because they have occurred over a (long) period of time and have remained roughly the same. When the young person asks, “Why do we observe this tradition?” we respond with the unconvincing answer, “Because we always have.” The word “tradition” is thus used to express that observance given to these practices, beliefs or methods which are passed down in static form from one generation to the next, whether they are meritworthy or not. It is not unlike our use of the word “custom.” “Tradition” is therefore placed in the category of old, crusty, and recalcitrant—a lot like my first car, a four-speed Ford Pinto—and often contrasted with what is recent, stylish and innovative.

Nothing could be more deceptive. When Paul wrote the Thessalonians to “stand firm and hold on to the traditions we passed on to you he was thinking of an active and living process (2 Thess. 2:15) that he urged his readers to continue. The very word *traditio* (or in Greek, *paradosis*), means a transmission from one party to another, an exchange of some sort, implying living subjects. . . . the

language of passing and receiving repeatedly expressed in the New Testament became the hallmark of the church’s understanding of “tradition.” Half a century later, we can hear Clement of Rome invoke the “holy rule of our tradition” with the same Pauline emphasis—not something *dead* handed *down*, but *living* being *handed over*.

*Traditio* is as much a verb (*tradere*) as a noun. It was *that* which Jesus “handed over” to the apostles, and they to the churches, but it also meant the very process of handing over. In the verbal sense, or what is called the active meaning, we should think of the church’s Tradition as a dynamic; it is a movement by which the Christian faith was deposited, preserved and transmitted. Harkening again back to my undergraduate classes, I often make the analogy of this dynamic to a football game. At the signal, the center hikes the ball, the quarterback receives it, and passes or hands it off to another player who then receives it. The entire event, or “play,” is completely dynamic given its interactive nature. This was no less true of the apostolic proclamation of Christ, whose “play” occurred in living communities. We cannot appreciate the nature of the church’s Tradition until we are confronted with that vitality, that which the church prayed, sung, preached and celebrated. The Tradition was the church’s life.



## Tradition and Church Authority

### Step 4: Form a Response

1. Based on the scripture passages and articles you have studied, briefly describe the role the following elements play for the church in deciding on beliefs or doctrines:
  - Church leaders:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - Church tradition:
  
2. Reflect on your own church experience. Whether you realize it or not, your faith has been shaped in large part by tradition. Some of this may be good, and some not so good. List some of the ways your beliefs have been shaped by tradition, and evaluate each one.



## Step 5: Discuss the Issue

1. What has been your experience with tradition and church doctrine? How did this affect you? What was positive or negative about your experience?
2. What is the proper role of tradition and church leadership in establishing biblical truth?
3. What has been your experience with church governmental structure? Have you experienced a church with a strong sense of authority in a bishop? If so, evaluate that system.
4. What type of church authority and organization does scripture establish? How much flexibility do churches have in organizing themselves?
5. Should a church or denomination have the right to make proclamations about what doctrines must be believed? What biblical or historical data do you have to support your position?
6. What do you think the church you currently attend could learn from the experience of the early church in the area of authority and tradition? Are there recommendations you would make?

---

## Tradition and Church Authority

---

### Step 6: Take Steps to Obey

1. While no church or tradition is perfect, most of us are fortunate—whether we realize it or not—to have a church heritage that has long sought to honor God and spread the gospel. Spend time thanking God for his faithfulness in guiding and growing his church throughout history.
  
2. We have established that faithful leadership is of supreme importance in the church. Spend some time in prayer for the leadership of your church.
  
3. Do something proactive to encourage the leadership of your church. This may take any number of forms, but the important thing is that you let them know that you appreciate them and support them.

## Issue Evaluation Form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please make brief comments on any of the following aspects of this issue:**

**Sound Bites and Case Studies** (Were any of these particularly helpful or unhelpful? Are there any quotes or scenarios you think we should add?):

**Study the Scriptures** (Were the passages selected appropriate? Are there other passages you might have added?):

**Consult Other Sources** (What were your overall impressions of the articles? Did they hold your interest? Were they instructive? Are there any you would drop or add?):

**Form a Response & Take Steps to Obey** (Were the exercises helpful and meaningful? Are there any you would drop or add?):

**Discuss the Issue** (Were any of the questions particularly unhelpful or especially helpful? Were they clear? Did your group discuss any issues that could be added to our list of questions?):

**Overall Impression of this Issue** (Please rate the issue 5= Outstanding, 1= Poor. Also include any general impressions or comments regarding this issue.):

1      2      3      4      5

**Corrections** (typos, grammatical errors, wrong passages, etc.):