Scripture and tradition
A dilemma for Protestants

Karl Koop

In the spring of 1521, Martin Luther was called to the city of Worms to defend his theology before Emperor Charles V. He had reason to believe that his day in court would go well. Cheering crowds greeted him as he traveled from Wittenberg to Worms. The preaching services that he held from one city to the next were jammed so full that in one instance a church balcony almost collapsed. Yet Luther also had reason to be concerned. A century earlier, Czech reformer John Hus had also been invited to defend his beliefs before a great council, in the city of Constance. Hus had been promised a fair hearing but was condemned as a heretic and burned at the stake. When Luther's friends reminded him of Hus's fate, Luther knew that his future was in doubt. Nevertheless he vowed to press on.[1]

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Having been ushered into court, Luther was instructed to renounce his writings. He begged to be given an extra day to prepare his answer. When he was brought back before the court the following day, he expected a further hearing but was met with a demand to recant the error of his writings. Luther's response included these memorable lines: "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason . . . I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God."[2] With this dramatic response before the authorities—the emperor, nobles, and lords—Luther established what would be foundational for Protestant Christians: Scripture would be their primary source of authority, and their consciences would be subject to the word of God.

Some of the German princes in the court were impressed with Luther's willingness to stand up to the powers of the world. They

understood Luther's bravado, even if they did not comprehend the details of his theological arguments. But others were not amused and responded with a question that Protestants have perhaps not always taken seriously enough: "What if everyone simply followed his or her own conscience?"[3]

The following days did not go well for Luther. He was placed under the imperial ban and excommunicated from the church, and his writings were to be burned. He might have met Hus's fate, had not his own prince, Frederick III, elector of Saxony, kidnapped him and taken him into protective custody. In secret, Luther was transported to the Wartburg Castle. There, ensconced above the surrounding hills, he translated the New Testament into the language of the common people. With a translation of the Bible that could be easily understood, and an accompanying doctrine emphasizing the sole authority of scripture [*sola scriptura*], Luther unleashed a revolution that would free Christians from the tyranny of the medieval church and enable them to interpret the gospel message for themselves. Yet such a revolution was not without potential shortcomings. What would guarantee that people would interpret the scriptures faithfully? And what would prevent them from being ensnared by their own private interests, and by the biases and prejudices of their own culture?

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The formation of tradition

The church has always been confronted with the responsibility of interpreting scripture. In early Christianity, members in the community had the right to speak (1 Corinthians 14), yet Christ's apostles were the primary interpreters of the gospel. After their passing, the churches turned to apostolic writings for guidance but soon faced the difficult challenge of having to decide which writings were authentically apostolic. By the end of the fourth century, the church had more or less identified twenty-seven writings as inspired and authoritative. This selection did not resolve matters entirely, because the question of how these writings were to be interpreted also needed to be addressed. All texts

demand elucidation, and competing interpretations confronted the church with the hard work of discerning the meaning of particular passages of scripture.

Theologians of the church responded by developing an authorized way of interpreting scripture that could be tied to the apostles themselves. Scripture was not apprehended in some arbitrary fashion but was interpreted in continuity with the way the church had read the Christian message from the very beginning.[4] Scriptural commentaries and creedal statements were soon adopted as means of providing support for this approach, and these writings were used to defend the faith against heresy. They became important points of reference for Christians, and they became part of the church's tradition alongside scripture.

Because scripture did not explicitly speak to every issue confronting the church, some claimed that God had wisely provided another source of revelation to supplement this deficit—an oral tradition. In their view, this additional source was passed down from one generation to the next, and councils and the teaching office of the church, including the pope, carried it forward. In the late Middle Ages, theologians and canon lawyers debated about whether to accept this second source, but they could not reach consensus.

In the sixteenth century, the Catholic church resolved the issue at the Council of Trent by supporting a two-source theory of tradition, arguing "that alongside the tradition embodied in scripture, there [was] *another*, extrabiblical, oral tradition deriving from Jesus' post-Easter instruction to the apostles, and passed down to succeeding generations by the magisterium of the church."[5]

Martin Luther was especially troubled by this oral tradition that was disconnected from scripture. When, for example, the church supported the sale of indulgences or the veneration of saints—practices that had developed independently of scripture—he protested. In his writings, he emphasized the authority of scripture and rejected papal and conciliar decretals that, in his view, were in discontinuity with scripture.

Not surprisingly, the authorities were in turn troubled by Luther's ideas, which they believed were dividing not only the church but also the empire. His views seemed dangerously indi-

vidualistic, and members of the imperial court were quick to point out that if everybody followed his example and relied on their consciences, the result would be religious fragmentation and political chaos.

Luther had no intention of elevating private judgment above the corporate wisdom of the church, nor was he intent on rejecting all that the church had held dear for 1500 years. Luther's *sola scriptura* principle was meant to secure the primacy of scripture. Scripture was "the *norma normans* (the determining norm) not a *norma normata* (determined norm) for all decisions of faith and life."[6] This conviction did not imply, however, that tradition should be categorically ignored. Tradition had its place when it was consistent with scripture and when it reflected the consensus of the church. Luther placed value especially on the early creeds and writings of the church fathers, and he saw them as trustworthy guardians of the truth that could help protect the church from error.

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But Protestant Christians did not always understand the way scripture and tradition were linked. Many viewed tradition with ambivalence and eventually rejected its place in Christian theology.

The demise of tradition

Wanting to distance themselves from Roman Catholicism, Protestant theologians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries increasingly emphasized the primacy of scripture and gradually nudged the concept of tradition toward the periphery of religious life. Protestant scholastics, for example, "declared that the authority of scripture was self-authenticating and thus valid apart from the faith of the church."[7] All that was required was a rational mind that could effectively understand the objective meaning of the text.

A more serious attack on tradition was soon launched during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, when scholars began to view with skepticism appeals not only to tradition but also to scripture. In theology, as in other fields of inquiry, individuals

were encouraged to think for themselves, to strive for dispassionate objectivity unencumbered by the past, and to subject all truth claims to a rationality that was supposedly unbiased.

Christian theology was not unaffected by this intellectual current. By the nineteenth century, liberal Protestants influenced by Enlightenment rationalism sometimes viewed both scripture and tradition as hindrances to religious experience. Some liberals believed that any formulations of the past hindered the task of theology, and they viewed such formulations as having been superseded by the new spirit of the modern world.[8] Christians influenced by the Pietist movement during this era were also critical of tradition, because, in their view, it interfered with personal religious experience and heartfelt spiritual expression.

In the twentieth century, neo-orthodox theologians once again granted scripture primacy but also recognized the importance of tradition. Doctrinal statements of the church were viewed as giving witness to scripture's unity and centre. Yet the temptation to relegate tradition to the periphery persisted. Today, tradition is often associated with hierarchical Catholicism, from which faithful Christians broke away, and it is deemed antithetical to the absolute authority of scripture. Protestants often point out that somewhere between the death of the apostles and the Reformation, the church "fell" from the original vision of the New Testament. They spend time learning about the traditions of the Bible but give little consideration to the interpretive process that entails drawing wisdom from the church's past and subjecting current interpretations to the church's experience of worship and communal life.

Stanley Grenz and John Franke, writing from an Evangelical perspective, have criticized the way contemporary Christians, especially Evangelicals and Anabaptists, have read scripture with the view toward finding meaning for the individual. Such an approach may stimulate a person's interest in Bible study, but it may also encourage a reading that is directed toward self-interest. Grenz and Franke note that if the individual's need is the primary concern in Bible study, contemporary Christians will encounter a proliferation of interpretations of the biblical text. Drawing on the work of another evangelical, Richard Lints, they make the following observation: "In banishing all mediators between the Bible and ourselves, we have let the Scriptures be ensnared in a web of

subjectivism. Having rejected the aid of the community of interpreters throughout the history of Christendom, we have not succeeded in returning to the primitive gospel; we have simply managed to plunge ourselves back to the biases of our own individual situations."[9] In their critique, Grenz and Franke are not questioning the centrality or primacy of scripture. Their concern is that, by ignoring the tradition of the church, Christians have become vulnerable to their own subjective interpretations.

This outcome may have been anticipated in the city of Worms, when the imperial court asked Luther what would happen if all people determined for themselves the truth of the gospel. In asking this question, representatives of the European powers were clearly acting out of self-interest. Yet even as they defended the status quo, they may have correctly anticipated the theological pluralism and religious relativism that besets our own time.

Reconsidering tradition

Postmodern theorists question whether any knowledge is attainable without tradition. Increasingly, theologians of all stripes are also recognizing that interpretations of the Christian story are always shaped by religious, social, and cultural contexts, which in turn are shaped by some kind of tradition. For this reason, they claim, it is really not possible to read any text, including the Bible, without coming to it from some particular standpoint.

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If they are right, then interpreting scripture faithfully can never mean holding strictly to the principle of *sola scriptura*. With this awareness, we can understand why denominations—or theological traditions, at least—do matter, and why the tendency among contemporary Christians to downplay the importance of their denominational affiliation is so problematic. All texts demand interpretation, and the interpretive process is always shaped by a particular stream or streams; it can never simply be generically Christian. As Grenz and Franke point out, Christians that "seek an interpretation unencumbered by the 'distorting' influence of fallible 'human' traditions are in fact enslaved by interpretive

patterns that are allowed to function uncritically precisely because they are unacknowledged."[10]

Christians must look to scripture for guidance in matters of faith and life; yet they should not ignore their own traditions, which are sustained by a secondary set of texts. Within Protestantism, these texts—creeds, confessions, catechisms, martyrologies, hymns, devotionals, theological writings, liturgies, and so forth—serve to identify the unifying message of the biblical canon for the church. They are points of reference, which assist Christians as they attempt to speak meaningfully about their convictions and commitments. They are valuable because they keep the Christian community from diversifying to the point that identity becomes meaningless. At the same time, they are not infallible, nor do they present a final word. At their best, secondary texts that make up a tradition generate further discussion that may lead to renewal and even reformation of the tradition, for confessional statements of the church belong to living, dynamic, and Spirit-filled communities.

Reading scripture faithfully entails reading not only through the lens of a written tradition but also through the lens of a living community of faith that has subjected itself to the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit.

Behind scripture and secondary texts, then, lies the embodied Christian community, the church. This community is the present embodiment of tradition and is "simultaneously the epistemological test of the truth of that tradition."[11] Making sense of the faith is not simply an intellectual activity for spectators; neither can it be carried out on the basis of some disembodied, ahistorical principles. It demands that interpreters themselves be participants. "How the mind thinks must eventually be tested by how the body lives."[12] For this reason, commitment to a particular, local, visible community is imperative. Reading scripture faithfully entails reading not only through the lens of a written tradition but also through the lens of a living community of faith that has subjected itself to the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit.

The living community of faith is the local congregation that includes regional and national affiliations. But the church must also go beyond its own theological and confessional particularity.

Reading and interpreting scripture faithfully in the context of the community entails becoming conscious of the fact that one is also a member of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, which spans the ages and is found in all parts of the world. Neither individuals nor denominations should proceed in isolation or hide from the wisdom of others. The hermeneutical community is not simply the local community in dialogue with itself and its own history, but it encompasses the church universal irrespective of ethnicity, class, gender, or confession.

Notes

[1] Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 89.
[2] *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958) 32:112–13; quoted in ibid.
[3] Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 155–56.
[4] Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 188–89.
[5] Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1988), 81.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 103.
[8] Ibid., 105.
[9] Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 93; quoted in ibid., 109.
[10] Ibid., 112–13.
[11] Harry Huebner, "Imagination/Tradition: Conjunction or Disjunction?" in *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1996), 75.
[12] Ibid., 76.

About the author

Karl Koop is associate professor of historical theology at Canadian Mennonite University (Winnipeg, MB). His recently published book, *Anabaptist-Mennonite Confessions of Faith: The Development of a Tradition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004), focuses on the significance of tradition.