

Embracing and contesting tradition and identity

Drawing on Paul for framing “Anabaptism at 500”

Gordon Zerbe

“I was exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers; but then God’s Son was unveiled within me.”

–Galatians 1:14, 16

“For I also handed over to you what I also took over [from others].”

–1 Corinthians 15:3

“You are holding fast to the traditions, just as I handed them over to you.”

–1 Corinthians 11:2

Identity and tradition

Our word *identity* comes from an abstract word in Late Latin (*identitas*), referring to the “sameness” or “thatness” of an individual or a collective entity.¹ These days, the notion of identity is increasingly complex and contested. When it comes to identity as “what I belong to” (as opposed to “what I am in my own person”), often individuals hold multiple identities at the same time, such that identity can be layered, conflicted, diffuse, or shifting.

The English word *tradition* can be used either for “the process of handing something down” (e.g., “received by tradition”) or for “what is handed down” (e.g., “they affirmed the tradition”). The same is true of its Latin root (*traditio*) and its Greek equivalent (*paradōsis*, e.g., Gal. 1:14). But the transmission process through time involves both delivering and receiving: Paul’s own use of what was conventional terminology highlights both the correlative “handing down” or “handing over” (*paradidōmi*) and “taking up” or “taking over” (*paralambanō*). What is more, the nuance of

1 Related to the words *idem* (“the same”) and *id* (third person neuter pronoun, thus “that thing”).

these terms in Greek implies the handing over of something *for custodial safekeeping* and the taking over of something *as one's own*, in the sense of embracing something, thereby also indicating a kind of responsibility.²

While we sometimes think of received tradition (whether positively or negatively) as monolithic, inflexible, or unchanging, the reality is that all traditions (or cultures) evolve through time. Moreover, they often represent the consolidation of multiple influences or starting points and

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are often porous, inspired by neighboring or even competing traditions. Meanwhile, all traditions draw on foundational events or sacred texts, the focus of later commemoration. Associated with this commemoration is often a quest to recover in later generations the original or essential meaning of foundational events or texts. Over time, the sacred texts as received become somewhat in-

determinate in meaning (that is, open to multiple possible meanings), even if they cannot mean just anything. When reflecting on a tradition, whether from the inside or the outside, what is sometimes far more revealing is how the sacred texts or foundational narratives have been received or appropriated. To commemorate is both to embrace and to interrogate and potentially reframe a tradition-in-the-making, as meaningful for ever-changing contexts.

The entire Bible is arguably a complex expression of the constant process of constructing, interpreting, transmitting, promoting, and reworking received tradition, as it intersects with changing ecological, material, political, demographic, and cultural conditions. At some critical moments, the normally incremental process explodes into dramatic and disruptive transformations. Paul (also known in Scripture as Saul) embodies and represents one of these massive transformations. As a figure, Paul is himself also “traditioned” (transmitted to and received by us) in more than one version. Is he (1) the dogmatic, tradition-rejecting and tradition-founding supersessionist and institutionalist? Or (2) the rhetorically flexible, both tradition-embracing and tradition-contesting reformer or revisionist? In

2 The compound Greek verb *paradidōmi* (“to hand over”) is also the regular term for “handing over” someone into physical custody, and in the passive voice, the term has the sense of “committing” someone to someone or something (as in Rom. 6:17).

contemporary Pauline scholarship, the former figure is giving way to the latter.

The messianic “now” and “soon”

On first impression, the case of Paul does not seem helpfully analogous for our thinking about the meaning of “Anabaptism at 500.” We moderns orient ourselves primarily with the remote or recent past. By contrast, Paul seems entirely shaped by a critical orientation to the messianic “now” (the irruption of Messiah Jesus into his own “present” time—e.g., Rom. 3:21) and “soon” (the imminent future conclusion of all things—e.g., Rom. 16:20). Paul thus stands between the decisive *already* and the inexorable *not yet* and claims that time itself has been compressed in these concluding times as history reaches its goal (1 Cor 7:29; 10:11). The once (the past) seems to shade in value. From one angle, there seems to be nothing by way of reform or even restoration of what has been but rather a claim to the messianic unveiling (*apokalypsis*, revelation) as absolute novelty, singularity, and finality—and thus incommensurable to anything else.

Indeed, this is an important *part* of the figure. In a crucial sense, as a result of sacramental incorporation into the body of Messiah, all existing identities (or differences, the flip side) are called into question in one way or another (Rom. 6; Gal. 3; 1 Cor. 12; Col. 3). In some cases, the reorientation of existing social identities involves reframing binary structures that involve socially constructed *us and them*, or *bettors and lessers*.³ Paul fosters a kind of radically disruptive messianic inversion, inclusivism, and universalism. The question becomes whether this ultimately becomes a coercive universalism, through a tolerance that operates as indifference to particularity and difference, one that undermines any continuing particularity of cultural-ethnic identity.⁴

3 See Gordon Zerbe, “The One and the Many, the Part and the All: Unity and Diversity in the Messiah’s Body Politic,” *Vision: A Journal of Church and Theology* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 77–90, <https://press.palni.org/ojs/index.php/vision/article/view/295/248>.

4 This is the complaint of Talmudic scholar and Jewish cultural critic Daniel Boyarin in *Paul a Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994). Boyarin reclaims Paul as a fellow Jewish thinker, who produced “a discourse on radical reform in that culture” (2). Boyarin thus wrestles “alongside” Paul, admiring many of Paul’s criticisms but also, in the end, “against” him (3). For Boyarin, it is Paul’s “very tolerance that deprives difference of the right to be different, dissolving all others into a single essence in which matters of cultural practice are irrelevant and only faith in Christ is significant” (9).

Solidarity with all that is “other”

Crucially for Paul, the messianic *soon* means a critical *not yet*. The messianic community must always see itself as a proleptic and incomplete figure of the grand goal (*telos*) of God’s restoring work. The messianic community must ward itself from any arrogance as having arrived, remembering that it is a *mere* remnant (not the *special* remnant), always longing for its reabsorption into the fullness. It must always regard itself with a kind of self-suppression, recognizing itself as only a provisional part that longs for its reunification with the All, when God’s unconquerable mercy will overcome all remaining binaries and divisions. It thus seeks to be in relation to and in solidarity with all that is *other*, all that is *lost*. For Paul, then, it is the *soon* future and the already *now*—and not the burdened and fractured *past*—that allows the messianic community to see itself as presently One, in anticipation of the fullness of the Oneness still to come.⁵

In this respect, Paul refuses to claim that the messianic community has taken over the prerogatives of Israel as if it were the “new Israel.” There is no replacement or displacement theology in Paul, as there is elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., 1 Peter) and in early Christianity (e.g., Epistle of Barnabas). The goal to which all leads is the combined “fullness of the nations” and “all Israel” (Rom. 11).

Reaching back and recovering origins

There is another angle: this orientation to the *now* and the *soon* should not blind us to Paul’s careful, even if polemical, positioning of himself in the ongoing contest for the meaning of his own scriptural and Judean-Israelite traditions. The dominant conversionist-supersessionist figure of Paul may be the cleanest, whereby Paul departed completely from everything in his past. But the bi-cultural, migrant Paul never stopped being “Saul” so that he could be “Paul.” We meet him as “Paul” only because his legacy lives on in Greek linguistic guise. He is firmly rooted in his past and continues to be deeply committed to his own tradition and people, as a self-identified Judean-Jew, who has nevertheless been “taken over” by Messiah (Rom. 9, 11; Phil. 3; 2 Cor. 11). To be sure, the outcome of “the apocalypse of Messiah within himself” occasions a massive attempt to reformulate and reframe the nature of his tradition and eventually to

5 See Gordon Zerbe, “The Relevance of Paul’s Eschatological Ecclesiology for Ecumenical Relations,” in Gordon Zerbe, *Citizenship: Paul on Peace and Politics* (Winnipeg, MB: CMU Press, 2012), 108–120, www.cmu.ca/docs/faculty/CMU-Citizenship-Chapter-7-The-Relevance-of-Pauls-Eschatological-Ecclesiology-GZ.pdf.

develop new forms of tradition (see below). His great pride in his Israelite past pales in significance *only* in its comparative relation to its transformation into the messianic present (e.g., 2 Cor. 3).

In seeking to reorient his own sacred tradition, Paul's fundamental argument is this (to put it somewhat simplistically): *Abraham is in* (as the crucial starting point), along with some of the prophets; *Moses is out* (or, with

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better nuance, is entirely relativized). As such, Paul can say that "the gospel was previously preached to Abraham" (Gal. 3:8). And whereas the original covenantal promise with Abraham is "now" being fulfilled through Messiah Jesus, the

covenantal law of Moses has been entirely reframed. Through Messiah Jesus, the "seed of Abraham," all those immersed into Messiah, thereby also become direct heirs of Abraham (Gal. 3). His comments about the interim Mosaic era "under the Law," however, are not entirely consistent and depend on whether he is advocating for the full status of new arrivals (Galatians) or challenging the arrogance of new arrivals (Romans). Meanwhile, the form and content of the ethical "rule [*kanōn*] for walking" (Gal. 6:16) promoted by Paul shows both departure and continuity in relation to the framework of his earlier practice within Judaism.⁶

Creating and consolidating new tradition

Paul does not only contest and reframe the received tradition of his fathers in light of messianic revelation. He is also attentive to the matter of establishing new tradition within the messianic community. On the one hand, he admits to "taking over" tradition "handed over" from others "in Messiah" before he was. He deliberately seeks for those in his assemblies

⁶ Paul vigorously argues that it is precisely the new regime of grace "through" and "in" Messiah that has the potential to inspire and energize a fulfillment of "the justice requirements of the Law" (Rom. 5-8). What we see, more or less, is a move away from the largely casuistic (case-oriented) regulations of his own Judaic heritage ("works of Law") toward a set of mainly social virtues ("fruit of the Spirit"), under the banner of the command to love neighbor, a summative recapitulation of the entire Law. Accordingly, Paul can even talk about the "law of Messiah" (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2). Paul certainly still offers casuistic guidance at times, but this does not appear to be his main line of interest. Rather, he encourages constant discernment and testing (Rom. 12:1-2; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-10) in concert with core elements of the new messianic tradition so that the will of God, the "good," can be known and "walked."

to “take over” and “hold fast to” what he has “handed over” to them.⁷ He even assumes that assemblies that he has not yet visited have been “committed to” tradition and teaching “handed over” to them (Rom. 6:17). Sometimes Paul quotes or refers to specific traditions being handed down orally, whether confessional (1 Cor. 15:3–7), ethical (1 Cor. 7:10), liturgical (1 Cor. 11:2, 23), or organizational (1 Cor. 9:14). While the specific source of these traditions is often unattributed, noteworthy is how Paul emphasizes the special status of the “command of the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:10, 12, 25; 9:14; 14:37). We can thus observe an embedded *Jesus tradition* in Paul’s letters, even though it is not often specifically identified as such (e.g., Rom. 12:9–21; 13:8–10).

On the other hand, Paul can vigorously contend with those who preach (in his view) a “different Jesus” or a “different gospel,” in contrast to “my gospel” or “the gospel that I preach among the nations.” He can confront a “contrary teaching,” other than the one “received” (Gal. 1–2; 2 Cor. 10–13; Rom. 16:17–19). The rhetoric can at times be fierce, at other times generous. And the battles lines are multiple. What we discern is that, just as European Anabaptism as a movement was marked by polygenesis, so was the broader Jesus messianist movement. Within the first thirty or so years of the Jesus movement, at least four other distinct streams can be identified other than that of Paul.⁸ In the next generation, some of these will seek to disinherit others.

Reframing “Anabaptism at 500”

Just as the messianic *now* was an occasion for reimagining the past, it seems to me that the *now* of global Anabaptism (which cannot be reduced to formal institutional bodies) requires a reconsideration of the genealogical construction of Eurocentric Anabaptism and its missional or colonial expansion into the world. We need rather to position ourselves in the *now* of global Anabaptism and then reflect on multiple affinities, associations, and genealogical connections and affirm multiple independent starting points.

In Paul’s day, non-Jewish Jesus messianists were not required to pass through known genealogical lines to become full heirs; rather, in the time compression that is “in Messiah,” they could become direct heirs

7 For the reception side of the tradition process, see, e.g., Rom. 6:17; 16:17; 2 Cor. 11:4; 1 Thess. 2:13.

8 See, e.g., Zerbe, “Paul’s Eschatological Ecclesiology,” 128n2.

of Abraham (Gal. 3; Rom. 4). Anthropological research shows that genealogically constructed lineage systems evolve over time, according to changing political and ecological conditions. By contiguous living, or by deliberate alliances, neighboring tribes become incorporated into existing genealogies—but at the front end, not the back end. The apical (or eponymous) ancestors of newer communities *become siblings* with the founding ancestors of the (once) majority movement.

While we imagine traditions through time as a kind of family tree (with roots, trunk, and branches), the tree model of actual genealogical connections itself breaks down past a couple of generations on both sides. Real biological connections are more like the complex interconnectedness of a bramble bush. We need to incorporate and commemorate many more origin stories into the narrative of what is now *global* Anabaptism at 500.

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