

## CONVERSION AND CONSTRUCTION

So that doctrine may influence numerous fields of human activity, with reference to individuals, to families, and social life, it is necessary first of all that the Church should never depart from the sacred patrimony of truth received from the Fathers.

Pope John's opening speech at Vatican II (1962)

**H**AD YOU CONVERTED to Christianity during the period that soon followed the apostles, you most likely would have come out of a Greco-Roman pagan worldview. This would have meant several things. In the first place, you were probably already very religious. When the apostle Paul said to the Athenians on Mars Hill (Acts 17) that he perceived they were steeped in religion, it was not a compliment but an observation. A veritable multitude of gods, spirits, *daemons*,<sup>1</sup> and philosophies were

1. The anglicized form of this word is *demons*, but demons (or *numina*, as the Latins called them) for the classical pagans were not necessarily negative in character. They could be benign, but they certainly were present and had to be reckoned with.

a practical part of daily pagan life. Roman culture was built on the understanding that the proliferation of religious activity was beneficial, not only for the person but (more importantly) also for the civic good. The philosopher-statesman Cicero had laid down the basis for right thinking about the welfare of society. *Pietas* (piety) or dutiful conduct in the amount of attention one paid to the gods by way of sacrifices, incense, and just plain lip service at public events was crucial for maintaining social stability. Everyone knew that the *pax Romana* was dependent on the *pax deorum* (peace of the gods). Even the religious skeptic must see, Cicero said, that "if our reverence for the gods was lost, we should see the end of good faith, of human brotherhood, even of justice itself."<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of religion was ritual, the kind and content of religious observances properly performed. Indeed, the Greco-Roman world was a strongly ritualistic culture that extended to virtually every area of one's life.<sup>3</sup> You and your family may have been worshippers of one god, be it a traditional god of the Roman pantheon or a more exotic god from Asia Minor such as Cybele, but you were not monotheists. Despite your personal devotion to Jupiter or Cybele, your weekly schedule demanded that you participate in the civic veneration of other gods, whether at your workplace, during a procession through your neighborhood, or at a banquet where a cup of libation was raised in honor of the emperor as a divine being. In such moments, you knew that these cultic acts<sup>4</sup> in the name of one god or another were social obligations and benefited the preservation of an ordered and secure life. From childhood you had been raised to be tolerant of this divine interchangeability. Even the loyalty to one's own family deity was not jeopardized by such religious syncretism. Accommodation to and assimilation of various divinities were the rule of the pagan life.

Of course, pagan religion also offered the hope of personal salvation. You would have heard of such phrases as "born again" or "baptism into new life" when it came to the spiritual benefits

2. Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* I.3.

3. Thomas Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: Ritual and Conversion in Antiquity* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1997), 8.

4. In this context, *cultus* (a noun) means an activity of worship or veneration.

offered. Proponents of Cybele would have told you that to be reborn spiritually, you had to be bathed in streams of bull's blood, a ritual known as the taurobolium. But this really had nothing to do with allegiance to one God or a plurality of gods. In fact, salvation had little to do with the exact content of what you believed as long as you did the prescribed acts. Form and action, not content, were most important. After all, Socrates had shown that it was not important to believe everything behind the religious rites as long as you were involved in doing them.

In sum, this was a religious worldview that the classical historian A. D. Nock identified as salvation through "adherence."<sup>5</sup> You accrued religious benefit not by rejecting previous gods and former allegiances in order to embrace new ones but rather by accumulating multiple deities and participating in the various worship services offered to them. This was exemplified in Apuleius's novel *Metamorphosis* (second century), in which the main character, Lucius, was turned into a donkey for spurning the gods. Only after he participated in countless religious ceremonies and joined a solemn procession in honor of the goddess Isis did he resume his human form. Even after this event, he could be found at the temples of other gods just "to be on the safe side." There was no need to discard the former divinities in order to accept the benefits of new divinities. Again, accommodation and assimilation were the rule.

All of this began to change when you became a Christian, for becoming Christian meant *conversion*, not adherence. You could not simply add the God of Abraham and Moses to your menu of religious options. As with Judaism and some philosophical schools, converting to the Christian faith meant rejecting all previous religious attachments and allegiances to embrace the new. As Nock put it, "By conversion we mean the reorientation of the soul . . . a deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness of great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right."<sup>6</sup> Religious syncretism as an option was no longer acceptable. The radical nature of conversion was underscored by two elements

5. A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933).

6. *Ibid.*, 7.

inherent to it: monotheism and the content of belief. Monotheism is defined by an unapologetic exclusivism that entails worship of one God as well as the rejection of all others. Converting to Christianity was like crossing the frontier into a completely different country: "an old spiritual home was left for a new once and for all."<sup>7</sup>

Conversion also meant that your religious activities were qualified by the assent of the mind and heart. In other words, the content of one's faith mattered; simply performing the right services was not enough. There was right teaching that led to salvation in Christ and to Christian maturity. When the apostle Peter proclaimed God's way of salvation through Jesus Christ to the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:34–43), his message contained a simple narrative of the death and resurrection of Christ and specific points of doctrine that provided the proper interpretation of the narrative. As a result of his resurrection, Christ is "the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead" (v. 42), he is testified by the prophets (v. 43), and he provides "forgiveness of sins" to "whoever believes in him" (v. 43)—all doctrines that became standard features in the major creeds of patristic Christianity.

In proclaiming the kingdom, Jesus had already conjoined conversion and belief: "The time has come. . . . The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). This fusion proved to be important for later generations of Christians because faith both as a response and as an intellectual content of the response became the pattern by which one's salvific experience was reinforced.<sup>8</sup> Christian conversion evidently called for major restructuring of the heart and mind, which required specific instruction and reinforcement of the salvation once begun. Baptism, prayer, liturgy, ethics, and the Eucharist (or Lord's Supper) all contributed to the Christianization of the individual. These elements were, in effect, venues by which a new believer was instructed in the faith. A late first- or early second-century document known to modern scholars as the *Didache* provides what may be the earliest manual of Christian instruction. It briefly tackles each of the essentials of Christian belief and practice: baptism,

7. *Ibid.*

8. Finn, *From Death to Rebirth*, 25.

prayer, celebrating the Eucharist, discerning true teachers from false, observance of the Lord's Day, appointment of leadership (bishops and deacons), and a list of commonly known key points of behavior (1.1–6.2) that lead to life or to death.<sup>9</sup>

In your new Christian life, you had no Bible as we understand the term today. Nothing like a standardized collection of texts existed, much less was available to believers. Many churches had copies of the Hebrew Bible translated into Greek known as the Old Covenant (Testament) by the mid-second century, though there were different versions that sometimes significantly conflicted with one another. At first, you would have wondered at the prominence of Jewish writings in a cosmopolitan religious movement. But you knew the value of prophecy from classical sources, given your cultural background, and had come to realize that the focus of these ancient prophecies was Christ. There was, of course, no New Testament yet. This did not mean, however, that you had no access to the apostolic writings. Evidence suggests that the Gospels (separate and together) and certain apostolic epistles circulated at the time. Other written works of Jesus' deeds and preaching likely existed,<sup>10</sup> but only some of these survived, and serious questions had been raised about their authenticity. More problematic was how an inauthentic apostolic writing was to be distinguished from an authentic one. There was no consensus on the matter as far as you could tell.

But all this did not matter much. Most Christians were functionally illiterate, which probably meant that you too learned your new religious devotion not through reading texts but in the way that Paul once stated: "Faith comes from hearing" (Rom. 10:17).<sup>11</sup> Christians valued the written word from the beginning and yet would have acquired the rudiments of the Christian faith through the early tradition as it was relayed via confessions, hymns, and baptismal instruction.

9. Known as the "Two-Ways," this section seems to have had a wide circulation in Jewish and Jewish-Christian circles. Literary parallels are found in the *Manual of Discipline* from the Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls) texts as well as in the Christian documents known as the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the fourth-century work known as the *Apostolic Constitutions*.

10. As Luke 1:1–2 implies.

11. Harry Gamble places the illiteracy rate of the general population of the Roman Empire at 90 percent or slightly less. See Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 4–5.

The tradition had presented the preaching of the gospel long before written documents were at hand. Indeed, the written word served to confirm what had been preached and taught. Baptism was an especially important passage in the Christianization process, during which the Christian truth was learned, professed, and lived. One of the earliest examples of baptismal confession (early second century) recounts a believer's words:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
 And in his only-begotten Son  
 Our Lord Jesus Christ,  
 And in the Holy Spirit,  
 And in the resurrection of the flesh,  
 And in the holy catholic church.<sup>12</sup>

Like most confessions, the rock-bottom components of what makes belief pointedly *Christian* are presented in this short formula, one that was easy to remember and offered a basic structure for thinking about God. The tradition enabled new believers to be confronted with the knowledge that distinguished true faith from false, that revealed how to think about God rightly, and that showed them how to discern appropriate ways of personal and social conduct.

In sum, before Christians had a Bible of Old and New Testaments, they had the apostolic tradition, which led them through the steps of conversion, shepherded believers into the life of God—by the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit—as realized within the church, helped them interpret the meaning of Scripture, and, when needed, supplied them with the word of hope in their suffering for Christ. The tradition was about salvation and how that salvation was nurtured once begun. The rest of this chapter looks at some of the mechanics of this tradition in its early stages.

### Tradition in the Beginning

The language and earliest content of the Christian tradition were first articulated by the apostle Paul, who encouraged the Thessalonians to “stand firm and hold on to the traditions we

12. *Dér. Balyzeh Papyrus*, as cited in J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (London: Longman, 1972), 88.

passed on to you” (2 Thess. 2:15, author’s translation). The apostle used the word *traditions* (Greek, *paradoxeis*)<sup>13</sup> in its usual sense: a dynamic of handing over and receiving or a living and active transmission of the church’s preaching. In this instance, his emphasis appears to be on ethical tradition, that is, corporate and personal Christian practices.<sup>14</sup> Most importantly, Paul does not set these traditions and his letter in opposition to each other. Rather, he sees them as complementary, as the remaining part of the verse shows: “Hold on to the traditions we passed on to you, whether by mouth or by letter.” His epistle serves to confirm what the traditions had been teaching.

The same was true for his letter to the Corinthian church. By the time he wrote 1 Corinthians, the church already possessed a normative standard (the *paradosis*) (1 Cor. 11:2) concerning the “what” and “how” of the Christian faith. Using the vibrant language of tradition, Paul says he himself “received” (*paralambano*) this “gospel” from the Lord, which he also “delivered” (*paradidomi*) to his readers (1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3). The tradition in 1 Corinthians 11 has to do with order of worship, specifically celebrating the Lord’s Supper. In 1 Corinthians 15, the tradition “of first importance” is a doctrinal one that enabled the Christians to interpret the Old Testament: “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve” (vv. 3–5). Again, there is no perceived conflict between what the Corinthians had received by way of the church’s existing tradition and the written epistle that would become Scripture.

It is important, moreover, to notice that in Paul’s statements there is no tension between the gospel as revelation and the gospel as tradition. Revelation and the tradition were but two sides of one coin.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the tradition did not stand against the inspirational process, out of which emerged the New Testament; it was a critical means by which the risen Lord had imparted his revelation through the working of the Spirit.

From the earliest stages of the Christian church, therefore, the language of tradition became the *modus operandi* for expressing

13. Most unfortunately, the NIV translates this word as “teachings.”

14. For a parallel, see Col. 2:6: “Just as you received [*paralambano*] Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him.”

15. F. F. Bruce, *Tradition: Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 31–32.

the transmission of the apostles' teaching, which was reflective of the Lord's own proclamation. As a result, Paul commands his readers to avoid any brother who "does not live according to the tradition [*paradosis*] you received [*paralambano*] from us" (2 Thess. 3:6). Both the noun and the verb of tradition language are used, in all likelihood, to stress that the activity of those who do not accept Paul's teaching is adverse not merely to him but also to the teaching of the whole church. A letter known as *1 Clement* makes the same application in its exhortation to the Corinthian Christians a half century after Paul. Rivalry over leadership had created dissension and schism in the congregation, and "Clement" urges anyone involved to give up such futile concerns and to "turn to the glorious and holy rule of our tradition" (7.2). The cumulative force of the tradition, not the writer, is the impetus for calling the church to such a response.

### Unpacking the Meaning

There are several ways to understand the tradition as it first appears and begins to mature into different and more sophisticated forms. The evolution of the tradition does not have as much to do with the canonization of Scripture as it does with movements internal to the tradition itself. The French Roman Catholic scholar George Tavadard has studied this phenomenon at great length, and from his writings three basic categories within tradition may be construed:<sup>16</sup> (1) tradition as transmission, (2) tradition and development, and (3) tradition as the memory of the church.

Tradition as transmission implies not only the act of transmitting but also, in an objective sense, *what* is transmitted. Unlike modern theology, which has become infatuated with understanding tradition as "process" and worries that attributing specific content to tradition might exclude a possible opinion or position, Tavadard argues that the transmitted nature of the ancient tradition implies that a "something" is transmitted. This "something" of tradition is what Tavadard calls the "continuum of fidelity" or the

deposit of faith, and it embodies the message of the gospel and its theological interpretation.

Furthermore, to think of tradition as "handed over" is to designate tradition as something living. Reciting the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed during worship is not merely repeating the past. It is recalling an experience or reliving an event. We make the creed come alive in the reciting, an act of faith by "remembering." "The creed provides the occasion and the immediate mechanism for the living expression of faith."<sup>17</sup> Obviously, it is possible to mouth the words of a creed in a faithless or dead way. In this case, the living tradition as received and its character as something transmitted are obviated.

A great deal has been written on doctrinal development as it relates to the variability of the content of tradition.<sup>18</sup> Simply put, the Christian tradition was and always is in the process of development. It is impossible to speak of passing on something unchanged. The reason for inevitable change is plain: Development is how the tradition responded to its present in light of its past. Transmission was not a matter of simply throwing ancient formulas or solutions at new problems and expecting them to be effective. Nor was it trying out new solutions without recourse to the resources of the existing tradition. Development, therefore, is not the introduction of changes but a response to discovering how the deposit of faith should function as a resource for the needs of the present. In this sense, Tavadard says, tradition is not a guarantee. It was not an infallible process of delivering the true doctrine of the church. Since the transmission of faith is at all levels tied up with time, language, and culture, there is always change, and change is inherently imperfect. Holding firm to a doctrine of biblical inerrancy does not annul the changing vicissitudes of history or make the hermeneutical challenges of transmitting and interpreting meaning over the ages simply disappear. Confidence in the authenticity of the message transmitted to us across the ages must be placed in the God of history who promised to lead us into all truth. Protestants of every stripe must

17. *Ibid.*, 289.

18. E.g., John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1903); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969); and R. P. C. Hanson, *The Continuity of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981).

16. What follows is indebted to the synthesis of Tavadard's theology in Marc R. Alexander, "G. H. Tavadard's Concept of Tradition," in *The Quadriga: Tradition and the Future of Ecumenism*, ed. K. Hagen (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1994), 287-311.

place their confidence in the Lord of the church and trust that the essential tradition and Scripture are the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit operating in the earthly church. The delivering and receiving of tradition may not be an inerrant process, but it was built on the capacity of the word of our Lord to lead his disciples into all truth in the midst of the world (John 16:13), to enlighten the eyes of their hearts (Eph. 1:18), and to fill them with "the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Col. 1:9).

A valuable contribution Tvard has made to the debate over the meaning of tradition is his notion that tradition functions as the memory of the church. If tradition is a preserver of the church's faith as the work of God in the body of Christ, then it is supposed to be a living and shared memory. In this characteristic of tradition, we are directed to the role of the church, which harbors the tradition and is also the agent for handing the tradition over to new believers and to the world. Tradition as memory is not the work of the individual believer, although the believer participates in it, but of the corporate body of Christ, the church. Only within the church can memory reside each time the Lord's Supper is observed or a new Christian is baptized, when the memory of the faith is called back and reexperienced. In effect, the tradition has to do with how it is transmitted through the acts of the church.<sup>19</sup> As memory, tradition has to do with how the gospel is transmitted, how the divine presence is realized in the sacraments (or ordinances) among believers, and how lives are changed by Christian truth.

It is here where evangelicals and free church Christians are at greatest risk, because guarding the church's memory has little to do with the purposes that guide most contemporary worship services. Programmatic needs set the agenda for content and order more than a consciousness that the church's tradition as memory is essential for feeding the Lord's sheep. No doubt the trendy styles of worship and proclamation are attracting more people, but what are they being given once they come in the doors and stay? All the relational activity in the world cannot make up for an absence of a content grounded in the church's historical memory.

19. "It includes also the high moments of the successive existence of the church through the ages" (Tvard cited in Alexander, "G. H. Tvard's Concept of Tradition," 297).

Related to the absence of tangible reminders is a longstanding emphasis among free church congregations that spontaneity is a necessary ingredient for worship to be truly Spirit led. Whether through prayer, personal sharing, or the sermon, authenticity is best released through extemporaneous acts of faith. The implicit presupposition here is that spontaneity makes worship truly heart-felt. If the work and presence of the Spirit result in a believer's freedom (2 Cor. 3:17), earnest Christians should not resort to the wooden props of repetitive forms of words in worship.

In contrast, prayers offered at regular times of the Christian calendar year, liturgies, and collects are regarded with holy disdain as artificial works of piety. Unfortunately, too many Christians who harbor such antipathy have never been exposed to the Anglican Book of Common Prayer or a Roman Catholic missal, and therefore, they do not know the spiritual sensitivity, beauty, and depth that are often found in these "artificial" works.

Legitimation for the free church approach is thought to be warranted by direct parallels to Jesus' words about the disciples' future ministry: "Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit" (Mark 13:11). Such spur-of-the-moment spirituality seems to have a greater holiness compared to prepackaged and predictable words taken from a prayer book or missal. Was not Jesus openly critical of religious leaders who thought they were heard "because of their many words" or "vain repetitions" (Matt. 6:7)? Yet Jesus was talking about an occasion when the sincerity of the heart does not match the piety of the words spoken, as opposed to the use of an ordered form of words thoughtfully used in worship. He would have been very familiar with and participated in the Jewish services of worship in the local synagogue, where the regular customs of congregational liturgies and commonly used prayers were observed.<sup>20</sup> Jesus was most critical of the hollowness of some practices of the Pharisees, not doing or understanding what they preached, rather than the worshipful traditions of the synagogue.

20. For the basic form of the synagogue liturgy as it probably was in Jesus' time, see Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 68-70.

Spontaneous or planned, words spoken and deeds performed in worship may be for the wrong reasons and therefore have no merit. Worshipers may merely mouth the words of the liturgy or sing worship choruses with little or no shared sense of their meaning, which is not the fault of the words, whether they are preestablished or used on a whim. But there is nothing inherently artificial about the use of liturgies in worship services. While usually attached to ceremonial activities, the early use of the word *leitourgia* referred to various functions that were done for the public (i.e., congregational) good. Thus, Paul describes himself as a "liturgist of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel to them" (Rom. 15:16, author's translation). As Paul was to the Gentiles, so Epaphroditus was to Paul when the latter was in prison. Writing to the Philippians, Paul refers to him as "your liturgist" (Phil. 2:25, 30) who ministered to Paul's needs. The term *liturgy* was again used by Paul to describe the collection of gifts by the churches in Macedonia and Greece for the relief of the believers in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 9:12). Jesus himself is called "a liturgist" in Hebrews 8:6, being the high priest of the new covenant as its mediator. Of course, Christ's role as liturgist was anything but spontaneous, having been planned before the creation of the world (1 Pet. 1:20). For believers who engage in liturgical ministry, whether as worship leaders or through acts of love, the point of importance is whether it is a truly spiritual service to God.

Ironically, the musical portion of services at many churches is preplanned and executed with meticulous attention to detail so that it is anything but spontaneous. Yet while the musical segments of contemporary worship services are expected to be carefully chosen and rehearsed, the use of a preplanned liturgy, on the other hand, is perceived as stiff, repetitious, and deadening.

There is nothing wrong with creating winsome programs for every age in a church, and yet congregational leaders must ask themselves the more vital question: How do their programs enable believers to discover the rich resources of the church's memory? How are neo-pagans of this age being Christianized such that their profession of salvation is truly a conversion? Surely the great promise of the gospel amounts to more than "accepting Jesus so that you'll go to heaven"!

In the resources of the tradition lie the essentials for Christian growth that are distinctively Christian, truly biblical, and doctrinally substantial. They are not the last word, so to speak, but they are the place for every Christian to begin in understanding the mind of the church. Drawing upon these resources allows believers to encounter and be encountered by the inheritance of catholic Christianity, the wholeness of the Christian faith that exceeds our tiny perspective of it. Not doing so is to risk nurturing Christians who are unable to stomach the "real food" of theology and sustained biblical reflection. Even worse, it invites the unconscious resurrection of old heresies in new guises.

### Tradition and Christian Education

It is no accident that the earliest development of the ancient tradition emerged out of a situation of need. The early fathers most directly speak of the church's tradition in apologetic contexts (when they are defending catholic faith against its detractors) and when they are defining the faith (describing it for the needs of catechesis, that is, when they are explaining the faith in the context of instructing new believers for baptism). We ought to bear in mind that there were no systems yet designed for presenting the Christian faith, certainly no theological textbooks or Sunday school type of materials that offered a rudimentary outline of Christian belief and practice. When the second-century Christian philosopher Justin announced in his *Apology*<sup>21</sup> that he was offering a "reasoned" presentation of what Christians believe, he was making new inroads toward Christian self-definition. Thus, Christian theology as a "craft" sprang from the need to define the faith against error and to instruct new believers, both of which were done in accordance with the early tradition.

#### *Defending the Faith*

The surviving sources of the second and third centuries offer more evidence illustrating the apologetical and polemical side for

21. An *apologia* is a defense of one's position, based on Plato's apology for Socrates, who had been accused by the Athenian elders of corrupting the youth of the city with unconventional ideas.

defining the Christian faith than the catechetical. This is largely due to the fact that apologies were by nature public documents designed to teach openly the rationality of Christian belief and practice. Catecheses, however, having little formality for the first three centuries, were oral exercises meant for memorization, not print.

Although Justin ostensibly wrote his apology to the emperor (Antoninus Pius and his heirs) as well as cultured Roman pagans, the audience who benefited the most from the work was made up of Christian readers. This is not surprising since Justin was a catechist in the Roman church and was regularly involved in preparing new converts for baptism. After addressing the charges laid against Christians (atheism, immorality, etc.), Justin proceeds to discuss Christian belief, virtues, and worship practices all the while supporting his arguments from Scripture (mainly the Old Testament). This latter characteristic of his treatise suggests that Christian believers were the implicitly intended audience. It is hard to imagine that Roman intellectuals would have placed any value on Christian Scriptures as sources of religious authority. Still, they were not oblivious to this literature. The pagan philosopher Celsus was probably motivated to write his anti-Christian book *The True Discourse* (in the early third century) by Justin's apology.

#### *Defining the Faith*

The notion of a catechumenate—a series of steps that leads a new believer to baptism and a deeper knowledge of the faith—was a creation of the early fathers who also gave shape to its integral role within Christian experience. This was, in effect, the first version of Sunday school, though a temporary schooling with specific aims. The earliest evidence for the process indicates that it varied from place to place and that it was fairly simple (e.g., the instructions given in the *Didache*). A more elaborate system was found in Rome as described in the *Apostolic Tradition* by Hippolytus, an elder and bishop-hopeful in the church there. But the Roman process was probably not the norm, and most other churches, being in smaller towns or rural settings, had something simpler.

Catechesis, or Christian instruction for new believers, reached new heights in the fourth century. Greater doctrinal sophistica-

tion due to the trinitarian and christological debates, the rise of several generations of highly educated and erudite Christian thinkers, and the influx of new Christians following the end of persecution led to more carefully and consistently defined structures for Christianizing converts.<sup>22</sup> This emphasis provides many examples of how the tradition took shape in this period and its role in Christian education.

The seriousness with which Christian leadership addressed pre-baptismal instruction is stated succinctly in the following directions:

Let him, therefore, who is to be taught the truth in regard to piety be instructed before his baptism in the knowledge of the Unbegotten God, in the understanding of His Only-begotten Son, in the assured acknowledgment of the Holy Spirit. Let him learn the order of the several parts of the creation, the series of providential acts, the different workings of God's laws.

Let him be instructed about why the world was made, and why man was appointed to be a citizen in it; let him also know about his own human nature, of what sort of creature he is; let him be taught how God punished the wicked with water and fire, and glorified the saints in every generation . . . and how God did not reject mankind, but called them from their error and vanity to acknowledge the truth in various stages of history, leading them from bondage and impiety to liberty and piety, from injustice to justice, from death eternal to everlasting life.<sup>23</sup>

The unknown writer's intention is clear enough. New Christians should become acquainted with the truths about God's identity as Father, Son, and Spirit and that the one God is truly a Trinity. This God and no other being or force created and orders the world, and his laws have given guidance throughout history and are tailored for each stage. Converts should discover the truth about their own dependent nature and that they stand responsible before God for not following after the good and the true. More will be said in chapter 5 about the later developments in catechetical instruction.

22. William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995), 51–56.

23. *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.39.1–4 (translation slightly altered).



## The Catholic Faith

A final element of the tradition that should be noted here is its catholicity. Protestants of all stripes must comprehend once and for all that "catholic" is not the opposite of "Protestant." Especially evangelicals and free church believers should understand that the catholic faith is that which they also regard as the true faith. It has been stated often before,<sup>24</sup> but let it be observed here also that "catholic" does not equal Roman Catholicism and that catholicism as a concept and an identity defining orthodox Christianity was articulated early in the church's history. Catholicity is no less necessary for sustaining the future integrity of Protestant identity than it is for grounding Roman Catholicism. Protestantism is as dependent upon the history of the early church for its identity as any other Christian communion. No single communion can claim to be sole possessor of the *catholica*, while every Christian church is invited to identify itself with its depths and the riches of its good guidance.

Early in the first decade of the second century, Ignatius of Antioch used the adjective *catholic* in a way that shows it was already in use among churches in the East. This first appearance of the word as a conscious term of description also shows that it was indissolubly linked with the church as the corporate body of Christ: The congregation that made up the church of Smyrna was "the Catholic church" in terms of the mutual presence of the bishop (pastor), the congregation, and Jesus Christ.<sup>25</sup> In other words, "catholic" is that which qualifies the apostolic church, wherein is the living presence of Christ. There is not an emphasis here on catholic as "universal" in a spatial or empirical sense. A younger contemporary, Polycarp, a reputed disciple of John the apostle and bishop of Smyrna, is said to have prayed on the day of his martyrdom for "all the catholic church," which he states is "throughout the world."<sup>26</sup> Yet the same document refers to the single church at Smyrna as "the Catholic church" (16.2).

24. For a short study of the historical use of the term and concept, see appendix 1, "Why All Christians Are Catholics," in D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

25. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 8.2 ("catholica ecclesia").

26. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 8.1.

As a noun, the word *catholic* stresses the two components of the Greek word *kat-holou*, meaning "wholeness" or "entirety." The church catholic teaches the whole counsel of the gospel, meaning nothing in its message regarding salvation and sanctification is lacking. Catholicity is the unity found in the Lord's teaching, a wholeness of a *via vitae*: belief, worship, and morals.<sup>27</sup> It is the communion of orthodoxy (lit., right opinion) as contrasted with Christian sectarianism (e.g., Gnosticism) or paganism. This kind of meaning attributed to catholicity is found in the more profound modern treatments of catholicism by Henri de Lubac and Karl Adam.<sup>28</sup> Rather than defining catholicism *per se*, both writers engage in discussions about how doctrine, the church, the sacraments, interpreting Scripture, and so on intersect with one another and together form the catholic identity. Catholicity, by its very nature, is characteristic of *what* the church professes and does. The wholeness of the catholic faith is found in the wholeness of the church's life.

For over a millennium and a half, Christians in all parts of the world (Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox) have confessed with some variation that the essence of true faith includes belief in "one holy catholic church."<sup>29</sup> The very concept of catholicity as universality transcends both space and time. The church catholic is everywhere it ought to be and has been through each age since Christ. It is reasonable, therefore, to think that catholicity offers the best chance for achieving ecumenicity. Modern theologians are correct in saying that ideas about catholicity need to be expanded beyond the borders of denominational worlds and constraints. De Lubac noted that the universality of catholicity is the opposite of a closed society.<sup>30</sup> Not that we should confuse this universality with the church's outward form. The church is catholic not merely because it

27. R. N. Flew and R. E. Davies, eds., *The Catholicity of Protestantism* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1950), 23.

28. Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. L. C. Sheppard and E. Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988); and Karl Adam, *The Spirit of Catholicism*, trans. J. McCann, rev. ed. (New York: Image Books, 1954).

29. As one finds in the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem and Epiphanius of Salamis and in the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creed. The Creed of Constantinople (381) contains the fourfold descriptive of the church, "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic," that became the normative confession for many Protestant bodies.

30. De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 298.

unites all members and all local churches in every act and event of Christ's life. Catholicity, rather, is oneness in the Holy Spirit, and this unity is the highest wholeness and fullness.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, catholicity as universal in scope is not the same thing as promoting universalism. The invitation of catholicism to embrace the world should not be confused with a radical inclusivism captivated by a culture of overbearing pluralism and confused tolerance.<sup>32</sup> As John Wesley remarked in his sermon on the catholic spirit, it is not "speculative latitudinarianism."

It is true that one should always be ready to hear and weigh whatever can be offered against his principles; but as this does not show any wavering in his own mind, so neither does it occasion any. He does not halt between two opinions, nor vainly endeavor to blend them into one.<sup>33</sup>

Not every doctrine or practice dubbed "Christian" or "biblical" can be included under the broad umbrella of catholicism. For something to be just or true or beautiful means that its contraries cannot also be right. Catholicity is not merely or even primarily about our irenic approaches to existing differences. It has more to do with the substance of our faith, "the true faith, the right faith, the catholic faith."<sup>34</sup>

Catholicism cannot be reduced to doctrinal or moral propositions, as some theologians fear is too often the case. But catholicity does imply that parameters exist for defining beliefs and practices that are truly Christian. In the third paragraph of the Athanasian Creed, it is plainly stated: "*Fides autem catholica haec est*" (And the catholic faith is this). Catholic tradition did and does possess a *receptum*, something specifically received by a believer or a congregation that distinguishes it as cleaving to faithful Christianity.<sup>35</sup> The *receptum* is what maintained continuity and linked

31. George Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Belmont, Mass.: Nordland, 1972), 41.

32. For an explanation of this mistake, see D. H. Williams, "The Diffusive Disintegration of Catholicity," *Pro Ecclesia* 23 (2003): 289-93.

33. John Wesley, *Sermon* 39.3.1.

34. Augustine, *Sermon* 52.2.

35. A partial working definition of essential catholicism, for example, can be found in the recent restatement of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, which argues for a shared baptismal belief in the truths that are rooted in Scripture and tradition, as interpreted by the church,

Christians to the Christian legacy of the past. Usually this was something basic such as a baptismal confession, which was the means by which "Christians recognize each other."<sup>36</sup> This was, in turn, the basis for unity and understanding.

The early church's emphasis on the catholic tradition further qualifies the sort of tradition we are talking about. In itself, there is nothing sacrosanct about "tradition." Many religious traditions exist today that are regarded as valuable and worthy of preserving, just as was the case eighteen hundred years ago, but they are not fundamentally Christian traditions. In the late second century, Irenaeus noted in his anti-heretical writing that church communities existed in the town of Lyons, where he was pastor, but not all of them were catholic. Apparently, diverse groups referred to themselves as true Christians and claimed to have a true knowledge of God that set them apart from the world and other ("carnal") Christians. These communities used the Old Testament and whatever writings of the New Testament that they possessed. The lure of acquiring special spiritual insight and scriptural understanding was of course attractive to these movements, often known by the blanket term *Gnosticism*. It was necessary for Irenaeus to stipulate the basis of catholic Christianity, which was distinguished by its apostolic character according to the rule (or canon) of faith and by the way that truly apostolic churches were interconnected with churches founded by the apostles or disciples of apostles. Direct and special knowledge from "on high" did not necessarily mean that a church preached the gospel of truth.

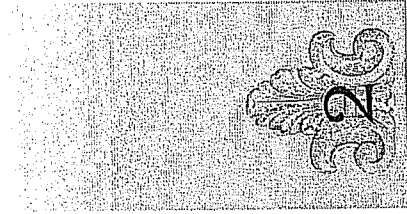
Thus, that which was "catholic" had to do with those most fundamental truths of the Christian faith according to Scripture that bound Christians together. The notion of "wholeness" was not the attainment of unity regardless of traditional norms of doctrinal or moral integrity. Augustine makes this plain when he describes the features of what he calls "true religion."

concerning the mystery of the Trinity: God the Father and Creator who works even until now; God the Son and incarnate Redeemer, who is the way and the truth and the life; and God the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, whom the Father and the Son send ("*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*: An Application to the United States," *Origins* 29 [1999]: 404).

36. Augustine, *Sermon* 213.2.

This is the catholic church, strongly and widely spread throughout the world, making use of all who are in error in order to correct them if they are willing to be awakened, which is a way of assisting the church's own progress. It makes use of the nations as material for its own operations; of heretics as a means of testing its own teaching; of schismatics to prove its own stability. . . . Some it invites, others it excludes, some it leaves behind, others it leads. To all it gives the power to participate in the grace of God.<sup>37</sup>

The *catholica* is the teaching of the New Testament and the early fathers that is common to churches that profess the historic Christian faith. It is the guarantee that God loves and saves us and tells us about himself.



## THE EARLY CHURCH AS CANONICAL

In accordance with the apostolic faith delivered to us by tradition from the Fathers, I have delivered that tradition without inventing anything extraneous to it. What I have learned, that is what I have written down, in conformity with the Holy Scriptures.

Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter to Serapion*

NOT ALL TRADITION is equal. For almost two millennia, the church's tradition has provided Christians with the essential baseline of theological faithfulness. But it has not always been clear which elements of the tradition should serve as ongoing standards for Christianity and which are denominationally or culturally specific. Since the sixteenth century, one of the persistent conflicts among Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Greek Orthodox has involved how one should discern which aspects of traditions are normative and which are not.

Constructive and interchurch dialogue on the matter of tradition was not taken up until the Faith and Order conferences (of

37. Augustine, *On True Religion* vi, 10.