

and architects for faithfully explicating the Christian faith. Series readers will see how (1) Scripture and the early tradition were both necessary for the process of orthodox teaching, (2) there is a reciprocal relationship between theology and the life of the church, (3) the liberty of the Spirit in a believer's life must be balanced with the continuity of the church in history, and (4) the Protestant Reformation must be integrated within the larger and older picture of what it means to be catholic. In effect, it is the intention of this series to reveal how historical Protestantism was inspired and shaped by the patristic church.

As Protestantism confronts the postdenominational and, in many ways, post-Christian world of the twenty-first century, it is vital that its future identity not be constructed apart from the fullness of its historical foundations. Seminal to these foundations is the inheritance of the early church, "that true, genuine Christianity, directing us to the strongest evidence of the Christian doctrine" (John Wesley). Therein Christians will find not a loss of their distinctiveness as Protestants but, as the sixteenth-century Reformers found, the resources necessary for presenting a uniquely Christian vision of the world and its message of redemption.

PREFACE

AFTER READING THE reviews of a previously published book,¹ you develop a sense of which of your arguments were insightful and useful, which were probably wrong and need correction, and which ones you said too little about. Each of the three kinds of criticism are useful, but the most challenging of the three is the latter one because it reveals gaps and unfulfilled parts of your argument. For many of these insights I am grateful, and I have had the sense from nearly every reviewer that we are together engaged in a task of reenvisioning Protestantism that is not and must not be restricted by the anti-Catholic polemics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (and that are still perpetuated today). It is time to move on.

My learned friend Peter Erb at Wilfrid Laurier University commented on the historical character of my book with the troubling words, "At the root of his book, however, Williams cannot avoid the challenge as posited by Cardinal Newman's adage, 'To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant.'² Erb should know that he laid down the gauntlet with this remark, for in the end (though not the end of this particular book), I hope I am able to prove

1. D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

2. Peter Erb, *Conrad Grebel Review* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 109.

Newman wrong by showing that the necessity of appropriating doctrinal history in the preservation of Christian orthodoxy is no less true for the Protestant free church than it is for any other species of Protestantism. To be “deep in history” for evangelical Protestantism need not be and should not be oxymoronic. One should not have to leave evangelicalism or a believers’ church setting to be nourished by the substantial resources available in ancient (or patristic) Christianity. The great model for this undertaking was and is Philip Schaff, whose scholarly work of the last century in producing translations of the primary texts of church history, the early church especially, is a sufficient demonstration that any oxymoron between Protestantism and the whole of the church’s history is artificially self-imposed. It is not necessarily built into the original fabric of the Protestant spirituality. This can be welcome news to many believers who wonder about the seemingly empty content and ahistoricism of their worship services. To redress the balance, this book presents evidence that is drawn from historical and theological resources. It may bring unaccustomed exercise to some, but I hope not frustration. Frankly, the only way to discover the wellspring of patristic resources is to present them in all their diversity and uniqueness.

Another challenge posed by my interlocutors on the subject of tradition has to do with how I halt more or less at the fifth century when it comes to identifying the church’s tradition. Like the nineteenth-century Oxford tractarians, my development of tradition was confined to the early church. Surely tradition continued after the Council of Chalcedon (451), a point I acknowledge but did not stress. At the time I was writing *Retrieving the Tradition* in 1998, it seemed like enough of an accomplishment to convince my free church and evangelical readers that there *was* a tradition that originally functioned cooperatively with scriptural testimony and that this tradition carried an authority that was necessary for defining the true or catholic faith. Nevertheless, the criticism is a valid one and deserves to be answered by facing the implications of the tradition as a canon of faith.

Overall, the reception of my theses articulated in earlier books and articles demonstrates that a deep hunger exists among various communions of Protestants for the rediscovery of the church’s historical witness as mediated by Scripture and tradition. Such

rediscovery, of course, includes the way in which the Christian past impacts present worship and spirituality. This is not a project merely about reinvigorating interest in the early church. But whether the efforts at retrieving the historical cornerstones of the early church will result or even could result in spiritual and ecclesiastical renewal³ remains to be seen. Certainly, these efforts will not be sufficient unless they are directed by the Spirit of God, who “searches all things, even the deep things of God” (1 Cor. 2:10). What the forms of “renewal” ought to look like once they happen is a debatable point and will continue to be so. At the very least, however, the degree of understanding that continues to grow between evangelicals and Roman Catholics on the essentials of the Christian faith is an encouraging sign of renewal in the church of Christ. The last decade or so of ecumenical dialogues and publications issued between evangelical groups and Roman Catholic representatives have been fruitful for creating greater mutuality (not denominational unity and certainly not doctrinal uniformity) on basic doctrines and practices. The conversations going on with Evangelicals and Catholics Together,⁴ the international dialogues on pertinent theological matters between Roman Catholics and Protestants sponsored by the World Evangelical Association,⁵ and the unnumbered pastoral and lay study groups seeking a deeper understanding of their faith in light of the broader picture of the faith are positive developments that bode well for the church’s future. There is, moreover, a new openness on the part of free church Protestants to hear and incorporate the contributions of Eastern Orthodoxy into the theological conversation.

Implicit to the agenda in the pages that follow is how Christian tradition retains its formative character through time and undergoes change. Given the dynamic nature of tradition as a living activity and process, rather like a spoken language, it cannot be immune to alteration and development. There is always the creation of new syntheses and emphases that may introduce

3. A question raised in Everett Ferguson, “Article Review,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002): 101.

4. Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Your Word Is Truth: A Project of Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

5. Formerly the World Evangelical Fellowship. See the Vatican’s summary of this committee’s progress report, *The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity* 106 (2001): 29–30.

significant modification. But no less a reality is the durable character of tradition,⁶ which preserves and defines the fundamentals of Christian belief. This character of tradition does not exist in an abstract form or ideal place. How change occurs within the tradition has created a mighty host of issues among Roman Catholics and Protestants. These are matters that deserve the Christian believer's time and effort. They are neither purely academic nor intellectual fodder for sustaining the ecumenical agenda. At stake here is what doctrinal faithfulness looks like and how it was initially defined, a critical issue for Christian churches in our post-Christian and postfoundational culture.

Finally, I should comment on my use of "Roman Catholic" instead of "Catholic" as the preferred designation for my fellow pilgrims. I remain steadfast on the point, made numerous times before, that the catholicism of the earliest Christian centuries is not the same thing as the religious communion known as Roman Catholicism. It can rightly be argued that there are roots in the latter traceable to the former. Customarily, Catholic (capital C) is used as a shorthand for Roman Catholic, but to say that Roman Catholicism is the sole and inevitable development of catholicism is not tenable. No one communion can represent itself as a privileged extension of the early church. The use of the epithet "catholic" is not uniquely of Rome. They are indeed catholic, but so are Protestants and Eastern Orthodox. The confession of the Apostles' Creed in "one, holy, and catholic church" is for every believer to declare and believe.

Let me express my thanks to Robert Hosack, senior editor of Baker Academic, who provided the initial stimulus for this volume and for the series of which this book is the first installment. No less of my appreciation goes to Prof. Fred Norris, who kindly read and offered valuable criticism on early drafts. I am grateful for the mix of friendship, ministry, and academic professionalism we share. Jeffrey Cary, my graduate assistant at Baylor University, also read chapters and helped bring clarity to parts of my arguments. Given the overall quality of assistance received, I hope that I have been able to translate it into writing.

DHW

6. See Robert Wilken, "The Durability of Orthodoxy," *Word and World* 8 (1988): 124-32.

INTRODUCTION

We agreed that if we could start seminary again we would devote more time to church history and patristics. Alas! Those are areas many people begin to appreciate only as they mature and accumulate experience.

B. J. Bailey and J. M. Bailey,
Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?

ANERVE WITHIN CONTEMPORARY evangelicalism has been hit, and its effects are ushering in enormous potential change. Discussion of the place and value of the great tradition is taking place among pastors and laity in denominations that have normally regarded it as irrelevant or as a hindrance to authentic Christian belief and spirituality. This new openness to hearing the tradition represents an extraordinary work of the Spirit in our time. The last half decade or so has seen a readiness among evangelicals and many mainline Protestants to open the door that has been closed to tradition, finding in it potential resources for understanding their own Christian heritage. Likewise, a literature is beginning to develop around the notion of Christian tradition, especially as it concerns the relevance of the legacy of the early church for today's church.¹

1. J. Cutsinger, ed., *Reclaiming the Great Tradition* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997); Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999); D. H. Williams,

During the centuries following the Roman Catholic Council of Trent (1545–63), many Protestants regarded the concept of tradition as the radically “other,” a kind of competing authority to biblical authority. Even for most of the twentieth century, tradition was associated with the practices of Roman Catholicism,² which had a decidedly negative connotation. Inherent to evangelical and free church circles is an anticredal perspective, which has played a key role in theological outlook and interpretation of the Bible. Creeds have been commonly regarded as a kiss of death, either as violations of one’s spiritual liberty or as stiff and deadening forms of Christian expression.

The Council of Trent’s two-source theory of revelation, written and unwritten, seemed to Protestant critics clear evidence of Roman reliance on two separate sources of revelation, Scripture and tradition, and that these were two equivalent authorities. It is remarkable that the mandate of receiving the church’s whole tradition, both written and unwritten, legislated in the seventh ecumenical Council of Nicaea (787)—which various Protestant communions accept as authoritative³—has been completely ignored by anti-Catholic apologists. Nevertheless, inclusion of tradition demonstrated to Protestants that Roman Catholicism had betrayed the primacy of scriptural authority. Despite the fact that other voices among their ranks have warned against such a facile position, the Bible has been and continues to be used as if it were an antidote to most of Christian history. The longstanding principles of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) and the priesthood of every believer, especially as it pertains to a personal understanding of the Bible, have served to isolate Scripture from its place within the church’s history. More than one sincere Christian believer or pastor has turned the divine character of Scripture into the antithesis to everything else historical in the church. With good intentions, but oblivious to the damage they are causing to Chris-

Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Your Word Is Truth: A Project of Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); and Stephen Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

2. See John Woodbridge, “The Role of ‘Tradition’ in the Life and Thought of Twentieth-Century Evangelicals,” in *Your Word Is Truth*, 103–46.

3. See chap. 2 below.

tian perception of its own legacy, some evangelical and free church leaders, in their desire to safeguard the distinctives of Protestant orthodoxy, have decried the very heart of the Christian faith.

Far worse than suspicion or opposition, however, is ignorance. A multitude of leaders within the free church tradition (Baptist, Christian Church/Disciples of Christ, Church of Christ, Christian and God, Nazarene, Evangelical Free, Bible churches, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Mennonite, etc.) rarely bother with questions about the role of the church’s ancient tradition or its relation to Scripture. On the one hand, the contemporary crush of being ecclesial administrators, family therapists, and persuasive marketers for their congregations’ programs absorbs most of their energy. As important as theological debates over the nature of authority may be, they are, quite simply, immaterial to the tasks at hand. (Since this is my own faith context, I do not idly write these words.) The fact that Protestant congregations expect good sermons from their pastors has little to do, unfortunately, with solid theological content based on using the best of the church’s intellectual and spiritual resources. A growing number of these same pastors are rightly dissatisfied with their designated role of “keepers of the institution.” They recognize, in accord with the exhortation given to Timothy, “guard what has been entrusted to your care” (1 Tim. 6:20), that the pastoral role consists of preserving and transmitting the Christian faith.

On the other hand, the theological ignorance of the church’s tradition reflects the way in which many clergy and Christian leaders have been trained. An appalling lack of church historical studies is required of those in pastoral preparation. I have lost count of how many times graduates of seminaries have told me, upon first reading early Christian sources, that they had never been exposed to anything like it before. With a few exceptions, biblical and “practical” courses at free church seminaries crowd out the possibility of becoming more steeped in the church’s formation and the historical struggles to define a Christian doctrine of God. What little is offered in historical theology usually consists of broad overviews of the church’s two-millennial history, discussions of post-sixteenth-century themes and figures, or narratives of the denominational history of that Bible school or seminary. Like tiny footnotes in a large volume, the early centuries of the church’s

foundations have a minimalist place in the intellectual formation of students. Small wonder that evangelical and Protestant leaders still have little or no acquaintance with the patristic tradition or a sense that they should become acquainted with it.

The Point

Lest the title of the present book lead readers astray, this is not a book that seeks to defend tradition or its place within Christianity. Nor is there a need to do so. For nearly a millennium and a half, the Christian tradition has offered direction to believers of all communions and affiliations on how they should interpret the Bible, what they should know about God, and how to understand the essentials of Christ's person and work. The task here is much simpler: to show the origins of this tradition and how it was received as an authoritative guide by the earliest centuries of Christians. The intent of this book, therefore, is not to argue for the legitimacy of tradition but to illuminate its place within Christian thought and practice so that Protestants of all stripes can see the value and necessity of its resources for appropriating the faith today.

I am not talking about a revival of interest in historical Christianity. Simply telling readers that they need more church history in their intellectual diet is not the point. Rather, if contemporary evangelicalism aims to be doctrinally orthodox and exegetically faithful to Scripture, it cannot do so without recourse to and integration of the foundational tradition of the early church. Theological renewal for Protestantism in general and evangelicalism in particular will take place through an intentional recovery of Protestantism's catholic roots in the church's early spirituality and theology. Herein is an avenue that leads not to the loss of distinctiveness as Protestants but, as the sixteenth-century Reformers found, the resources necessary to preserve a Christian vision of the world and its unique message of redemption.

Because the Christian faith is always older and bigger than any one denominational claim upon it, we must examine more closely how the Christian tradition first developed in early Christianity. We need to see how it operated in relation to Scripture and the other principal doctrines of the sixteenth-century Reforma-

tion. Protestants should bear in mind that Protestantism is not a negative or reactionary understanding of Christianity. Only in a secondary sense is a Protestant one who "protests" (*protesto, -are*) against certain views of Roman Catholicism. In fact, a Protestant is by first definition one who affirms or professes the truths of the faith. For the first generation of Protestants, the truths of the faith were found in Scripture and the writings of the early church fathers.

Tradition: A Continuity of Faith?

It is particularly ironic, at least among academics, that while Protestant thinkers are looking more intensely for ways in which their faith is a continuation of earlier ages, contemporary Roman Catholic theologians are seeking ways to show how much doctrine and practice have changed throughout the centuries. Are there points along the continuum of the church's faith that connect today's Christianity with that of the early Christians? Evangelicals, who have paid little attention to the time between the era of the apostles and the Reformation, still assume that the answer is yes. To read the New Testament is to read about matters immediately relevant and applicable for today's church. While most of the church's history may be "fallen" and superfluous for maintaining a vital faith in the twenty-first century, the Bible as divine revelation does not suffer from the same limitations. Of course, such an antiseptic view of Christian history was challenged by Protestant liberal and moderate thinkers throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries who concluded that the Bible is just as culturally and ideologically bound as the rest of church history. For most of theological liberalism,⁴ however, this meant that the Bible as "story" ought to be distinguished from the Bible as "event." The "story" was central and had little to do with the actual facts of events. These events may

4. Another stream within Protestant liberalism took the approach that there is no substantial connection between what Christianity was and what it has become. Harvey Cox, for example, says that while we need to take lessons from the resources of the early Christians, we must avoid "mythicizing" them for our own purposes (Harvey Cox, *Turning East* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977], 160-61). Both story and events are pious fictions concocted by the earliest believers. For an overview, see J. Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity Interpreted through Its Development* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1954).

or may not have actually occurred, but it did not really matter. The Christian "story" as portrayed in the apostles' writings and later patristic texts, was a decontextualized divine movement whose reality was not grounded in the variability of history. In the end, this meant that the grand narrative of Christianity had no actual continuity with the past; it was unhinged from the warp and woof of Christian history. Protestant fundamentalists and evangelicals responded by insisting on the complete continuity between "facts" and "story" as far as the Bible goes. Historical and cultural differences aside, believers may likewise count on a spiritual and doctrinal continuity between the time of the apostles and today, though this same principle is not applied to most of church history.

For hundreds of years, the official communiqués of the Vatican operated with a set of assumptions similar to that of evangelical Protestantism but for different reasons. Magisterial voices insisted that the church's tradition represents a more or less unchanging deposit of the Christian faith as articulated by the Roman Catholic Church. Not only is there a continuity of biblical or doctrinal truth from age to age, but the enduring nature of biblical and doctrinal truth is guaranteed only as it has been declared officially by the church. At the third session of the first Vatican Council (1870), the Vatican determined that while there is always progress in human understanding in the succession of ages, the meaning of "sacred dogmas is perpetually to be retained which our Holy Mother Church has once declared, and there must never be a deviation from that meaning."⁵ This position was softened a century later when the Vatican said that all dogmatic formulations are historically conditioned and that the meaning of doctrinal pronouncements is always dependent upon changeable conceptions of the age in which a pronouncement is made. Longstanding teaching of the church may give way to new expressions, although the original meaning remains the same and remains binding.⁶

A large number of contemporary Roman Catholic theologians, however, are unhappy with what they regard as a dogmatic and

5. Cited in J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, eds., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (New York: Alba House, 1995), 477. The *Constitution Orientalium Dignitas* (1894) stated in confirmation that the dogmas that the church has received have a divine character and therefore are immutable.

6. *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (May 11, 1973).

historically unsound response to the variegated nature of the church's traditions. Transmission of the tradition through time and place is susceptible to change, sometimes significantly so. Despite the openness expressed at Vatican II⁷ regarding the inherent flexibility of the church's tradition, the official position is to view tradition as an object derived from the past that passes unchanged from one generation to the next.

Terrence Tilley, a Roman Catholic theologian, has made a cogent case to the contrary. His arguments are worth considering as a means for better understanding the present purpose of clarifying tradition. The problem, Tilley says, is that certain beliefs and practices deemed "traditional" by the church hierarchy are not found in the previous ages of the church in their present form or have no precedent at all. "If that which is passed on as a tradition has to be passed on 'unchanged and uncorrupted' over long periods of time, then there are no concrete traditions that will pass the test."⁸ The last two millennia of church history have demonstrated that the church's tradition is in a constant state of adapting (or "inventing") itself to new theological, cultural, and linguistic changes such that tradition as content is not sufficient to explain the changes and innovations within tradition.

Instead, tradition should be understood as a set or network of enduring practices rather than a particular set of propositions. "Traditions are not reified 'things' that can be known apart from practice."⁹ Religious practices are not self-evident and have to be interpreted by rules. Thus, Tilley argues for a "grammar of a tradition" or what he also calls a "rule theory of doctrine" that serves as a guide for determining legitimate or illegitimate developments

7. *Dei Verbum*, II.8, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W. Abbott (New York: Association Press, 1966), 116.

8. Terrence W. Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000), 27. Tilley mines no words about the reality of change in the church's official doctrine, as seen in the clear differences over the prerogative of religious freedom between the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) and *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965). Movement from its condemnation in the nineteenth century to the advocacy of religious freedom at Vatican II as a positive political good constitutes a "reversal of principles" (ibid., 117). No developmental theory of doctrine could have anticipated the sort of radical change that occurred within the faith on this point. For church officials to declare otherwise is an abuse of tradition. Tilley singles out the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which has been an inventor, creator, or violator of the tradition it claims to preserve and defend (ibid., 38). This seems rather severe given the admissions in *Mysterium Ecclesiae*.

9. Ibid., 45.

of the tradition. Central to Tilley's argument is the constructed nature of tradition. Quite literally, tradition isn't anything if it isn't a construction. Most historians of Christianity would agree on this basic point. This is certainly one of the lessons that the fourth-century trinitarian controversies taught us. With a more objective eye, we see that both Arius and Athanasius were and were not representing the church's tradition in their theologies and that previous (Origenist) traditions had to undergo modification in the process of articulating a Nicene tradition. The ensuing polemics and characterizations of each figure by the opposing side were so harsh because there was no single agreed upon version of the tradition. What we call Nicene "orthodoxy" became the dominating theological tradition only after much time and internal strife.

The question is whether Tilley's "grammar of a tradition" is really able to help us determine the difference between authentic developments of tradition and illegitimate developments. Can rules of discourse about tradition enable believers to know whether a tradition is true as opposed to false? Even if we grant that unrealistic expectations have been placed on the content of tradition as an immutable and fixed entity, we must avoid the other extreme of saying that almost nothing can be said concretely about it, apart from the establishment of general "rules" of discourse. Accepting the mutable reality of tradition does not negate the idea that there exists within Christianity a core or central understanding that has enshrined itself in specific ways and continues to serve as a point of departure for subsequent theological and biblical exegesis. Like the incarnation itself, no element of the tradition is free from its own historical origins and context. Tilley is right to resist attempts to posit tradition in the abstract or Platonic ideal such that terrestrial traditions are derived from an ethereal tradition that is untouched or unaffected by practices.

We may also ask whether the self-understanding of tradition has always been as static and immutable as moderns characterize it. The broader scope of catholicism offers evidence of something much less than a monolithic composition. For most of the early history of Christianity, there were at least two acknowledged sides to the tradition: (1) the apologetic-polemical, which sought to depict the tradition as linear and unchanging against heretical

claims of divine revelation, and (2) the interecclesial, which admitted the existence of a certain fringe or "loose ends" concerning what the church teaches. Certainly, the rhetoric of each approach to tradition impacted the other, but the two approaches are not identical, distinguishing themselves in the primary literature.

Irenaeus is a good example of an ancient figure acquainted with church politics who reveals this distinction. In his writing against Gnosticism (*Against Heresies*), he presents the catholic faith in monolithic style ("throughout the world the catholic church is one body"), in complete agreement with itself and having an invariable succession of teaching. But in his intra-church activities, he knows all too well of the differences that exist and result in divided opinions.¹⁰ A similar sort of distinction is found in the preface to Origen's *First Principles*. Here the author is careful to differentiate within the tradition or rule of faith between fundamental or generally accepted expressions of the Christian faith and those more debatable and controverted. Not all of what he would have called tradition carried the same authority. Acknowledging such diversity within early Christianity is not antithetical to positing a central axis of faithful self-awareness that functioned within the unfolding of sacramental activities and intellectual exchange of living communities.

It is true that we can know the tradition only within the particularities of time and space, the reality of which should allow for specific statements of belief, creeds, baptismal formulae, and so on as reliable, if partial, manifestations of the tradition. No one aspect of the early tradition can encapsulate the whole, nor should it. The fact that there is no single embodiment of the tradition does not mean that there are no specific embodiments that offer privileged guidance regarding how the tradition should look or operate. The fact that the church's rule or tradition emerges from definite times and spaces does not negate the same tradition's ability to function as the chief hermeneutic for discerning the difference between true and false doctrine. Even in its most enculturated and hidebound forms, the ancient tradition offers true glimpses of God's intention for our redemption and transformation into the divine image.

10. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* V.24.9-13.

Thus, the tradition manifested a fixed and fluid content within a living history, which, throughout the earliest centuries, was constituted by the church and also constituted what was the true church. Because the tradition has always functioned dynamically within the concrete moments of history, its essential character involves the duality of conservatism and change. In other words, we find within the operating domain of Christian tradition the joint imperatives of preservation and renewal. The former requires that the tradition be immune to the attrition of time, whereas the latter declares that its use is subject to abuse and corruption as well as recovery and correction.

For Clarification

For the purposes of this book, "tradition" or "traditions" refers to those elements of any Christian affiliation or denomination that govern its understanding. Every Protestant grouping has its traditions no matter how antitrade and antireform it may be. The very notions of biblical authority, the preeminence of Pauline theology in articulating the gospel, theories of believers' separation from the world, and so on all constitute kinds of traditions that evangelicals or fundamentalist Christians rely on for their approach to the Bible and the church. My primary interest, however, is in *the* tradition, the foundational legacy of apostolic and patristic faith, most accurately enshrined in Scripture and secondarily in the great confessions and creeds of the early church. More will be said about this in chapter 2.

Let me also define how I use the phrase "early church" (or "early Christian"). Essentially two applications of the label are used by scholars: as a reference to the Christian communities of the first and early second century, often called the New Testament church, or as a way of talking generally about patristic Christianity, that is, the period of the church that immediately followed the apostles and continued for five or six hundred years. I emphasize the latter as the early church, more or less equivalent with the patristic age.¹¹

11. The term *patristic* (age of the ancient fathers) is really emblematic, referring to the early period of Christian literature, art, and history produced by men and women, orthodox and heretical, prominent and anonymous.

This is the era in which the formulation of Christian doctrine, canonization, and the interpretation of the Bible took place, making it "ground zero" for the way in which all subsequent ages of the church have defined themselves.

With regard to the structure of the present volume, the first chapter discusses the origination and basic components of the tradition as a preparation for what follows. Because tradition has so often posed problems for Protestants, much of this book deals with several major interpretive issues related to the authority of tradition (chap. 2) and the relationship between the tradition and the Protestant traditions of "Scripture alone" (chap. 3) and "by faith alone" (chap. 4). The capstone of these studies is a brief review of the ways in which the tradition was manifested within the diversity of the ancient sources (chap. 5).

Readers are encouraged to read the foundational sources for themselves. It is a needless though common mistake for newcomers to early Christian literature to be content with modern works that discuss this period instead of reading the sources themselves. Far worse is when teachers of church history do not mandate reading from these sources. Therefore, a short list of primary patristic texts in English follows the conclusion of this book. Baker Academic will also make available a collection of patristic texts that is meant to serve as a supplement to this book. For the nonspecialist in patristic studies, the sources listed there will be a good place to start. It is hoped that the pastor, professor, theology student, and informed lay reader will incorporate these sources into their respective ministries and spiritual quests.

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Readers are encouraged to read the foundational sources for themselves. It is a needless though common mistake for newcomers to early Christian literature to be content with modern works that discuss this period instead of reading the sources themselves. Far worse is when teachers of church history do not mandate reading from these sources. Therefore, a short list of primary patristic texts in English follows the conclusion of this book. Baker Academic will also make available a collection of patristic texts that is meant to serve as a supplement to this book. For the nonspecialist in patristic studies, the sources listed there will be a good place to start. It is hoped that the pastor, professor, theology student, and informed lay reader will incorporate these sources into their respective ministries and spiritual quests.

POSTSCRIPT

THIS BOOK WAS not an attempt to persuade evangelicals to embrace a particular ecclesiastical perspective. I myself am planted within the free church tradition and intend to stay there. Of course, some free church Christians end up taking a "high church" route, but that is not what I am advocating here. Instead, I have been arguing for a new reform of the old reforms that gave birth to the various families of faith known as Protestantism. My hope is that the energy of evangelical piety, with its emphasis on personal conversion, could be adapted to and shaped by the faith of the early church's tradition. It is a realistic goal. There are certain religious impulses that the free church and the early church share in common, as a recent set of articles on this subject has suggested.¹ The ideas proposed in that collection are but a beginning, and while the search for commonalities always risks artificiality, at the very least, characteristics of spirituality and biblical literacy exist that the two can gain from each other. After all, the patristic tradition is an indigenous part of the history of Protestant evangelicalism, whether conscious to many of its believers or not. As discussed earlier, some of the features of the apostolic and patristic church are part of the DNA, as it were, of the nature of evangelicalism.

1. D. H. Williams, ed., *The Free Church and the Early Church: Essays in Bridging the Historical and Theological Divide* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

Evangelicals simply need to look beyond their own experience into the broader heritage of the Christian faith.

The problem is that too many of these features have been forgotten or ignored for the reasons reviewed earlier. Meanwhile, evangelicalism is becoming increasingly relativized by the social contexts, mainly Western, that it inhabits. While no Christian tradition can prevent itself from becoming partly enculturated, the question arises, How much should Christians accommodate their faith to culture in order to speak to that culture? How can one become all things to all people without becoming no longer oneself? As evangelicalism continues to lower its doctrinal and ethical "walls" in the name of providing a user-friendly church, what is it able to offer to those who discover Christian conversion, not merely through their own experiences of God but as participants in the historic faith and practice of the church? In short, what message is evangelicalism able to give society that culture is not already giving it?

Theological commentators have noted many times that evangelicalism is suffering from a loss of coherency, as the very content of the historic faith no longer informs the central task of the church. Preaching easily slips into the mode of moralizing or anecdotal storytelling, and eventually the flock of God can no longer stomach a diet that might cause them to think deeply about the content of the Christian faith.² Congregations are well schooled in neatly dividing the faith into practical and theoretical aspects, convinced that only the former are of concern to them. Theology is therefore an elective of the Christian life, not necessary and too divisive for a religion of civility. In their quest to reach culture, evangelical congregations have come to reflect the cultural preferences of their audiences: anti-institutional, informal, nondogmatic, therapeutic, and unaware of the difference between tolerance and moral confusion.

Yet many evangelicals are discovering that no amount of creative packaging and marketing of the gospel will rescue church ministry if they lose the theological center that enables them to define the

2. David Wells, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); idem, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); and E. T. Oakes, "Evangelical Theology in Crisis," *First Things* 36 (October 1993): 38-44.

faith and prescribe the kinds of intellectual and practical relations it should have in the world. Given the centrifugal and atomistic forces already inherent among free church and evangelical forms of Christianity, the lack of an identifying center is spiritually and intellectually debilitating. Over half a century ago, Henri de Lubac raised a question in his study of Catholicism that is still strikingly relevant: "Does not neglect of dogma increase the extent of moral failure?"³ Separating the two (doctrine and morality) not only is a violation of the catholic spirit but also fails to understand the nature of the Christian life. Lest we forget, the Israelites' worship and approach to God were enshrined in the Ten Commandments, where thought and practice were symbiotic ways of honoring God as Creator and Lord. "You shall have no other gods before me" was a theological statement that implied some very practical issues.

Let me also restate that the proposal of a *ressourcement* of the early church's faith for evangelicals is not a betrayal of the evangelical spirit any more than it was for the catholic spirit when it was called forth as part of the Roman Catholic renewal in the mid-twentieth century. Evangelical *ressourcement* is rather the necessary next step for contemporary evangelicalism that it might grow with theological integrity and ecumenical prudence in a cultureless culture and Christless spirituality. If, indeed, the church must create its own culture to preserve a distinctive existence in the midst of the decay of Western culture,⁴ then such resources are critical fonts for believers to discover their roots and Christian identity.

Part of the new reform of the old reforms is that the tradition of the early church should not be used as a polemical device by evangelical Protestants (or Roman Catholics or Eastern Orthodox) to disprove the historical and spiritual legitimacy of the others. The anti-Catholic polemics and revisionist histories that have marked Protestant apologetic literature for the last three centuries have not been successful either in discrediting the Roman Catholic Church or in unifying Protestants. The appeal to the Bible as the only infallible rule, stripped of its historical packaging of church

3. Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. L. C. Sheppard and E. Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 15.

4. As argued in Ralph Wood, *Contending for the Faith: The Church's Engagement with Culture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003).

and tradition, has not established a more certain or harmonious interpretation. J. I. Packer is correct in declaring that the Reformation is over, by which he means that the forging of our Protestant identity should no longer be done in the furnace of heated anti-Catholicism. Protestantism's own identity is inescapably hinged to the Roman Catholic identity, as Karl Barth quipped after he attended part of Vatican II. Without continuously engaging Roman Catholicism both critically and constructively, the claim to catholicity from the side of the Reformation churches remains empty. This engagement is what Barth referred to as "dialectical catholicity," a course that he steered between the neo-Protestantism of his day and Roman Catholicism. Only if one occupies a "common room" that exists for both sides can the other continue, as Barth phrases it, to become a question to oneself. It is when we remain in an authentic tension of questioning ourselves that the benefits of the Reformation—"once reformed, always in the process of being reformed"—are served.⁵

Without doubt, the early tradition offers the most trustworthy way of future dialogue between the major dissenting Christian churches. As has been shown time and time again in the theological venues of the World Council of Churches and similar initiatives, the patristic age provides an avenue for an ecumenism faithful to Scripture and the church precisely because it is foundational to all church communions. The canons of faith and text erected in the patristic period provide a kind of doctrinal, liturgical, and practical hallway into which the "rooms" of Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism open. In this hallway, we may meet and discover some common ground—the bedrock—for all three major families that precedes any one claim upon it, which we may believe and defend together.

A marvelous and unexpected example of this dynamic can be found in the heart of Texas. The Development of Early Catholic Christianity Seminar (also called the Second Century Seminar) is a twice-a-semester meeting of professors, pastors, and priests from a number of academic institutions and religious affiliations that has convened several times since the early 1970s. Out of this group have come many of the contributions of Albert Outler, Wil-

5. Karl Barth, *Ad Limina Apostolorum: An Appraisal of Vatican II*, trans. K. R. Crim (Richmond: John Knox, 1968). In this essay, Barth coins the phrase "evangelical catholic."

liam Farmer, Denis Farkasfalvy, Everett Ferguson, and others in areas of church history, patristic studies, and Bible. What mutually exclusive denominational positions will not allow, this academic setting has provided and continues to provide for younger scholars with a heart for the church. Through shared texts and critical responses to the early fathers, this group has explored the bases of doctrines and practices that are common denominators for the Christian identity. Here ecumenism is seen at its best as this group has sought the place of historical and theological consensus in the light of fidelity to the biblical and traditional sources.

Other steps of the new reform involve discovering in this post-Reformation age that the Bible is most faithfully understood not merely by the tools of literary, historical, and form criticism but through the lenses of the church's canonical tradition. We need to regain the richness of scriptural interpretation and imagination by disallowing modern critical theory the sole prerogative in exegesis. Certainly, enormous strides have been made in the last century of biblical scholarship, but there have been losses as well.⁶ To accept the authority of the tradition is to embrace the principle that biblical interpretation ultimately belongs in the church, not in the academy. The tradition also gives the church a foundation for preserving the essentials of the Christian message in its reading of the Bible. Augustine's oft-quoted remark comes to mind: "I should not have believed the gospel if the authority of the catholic church had not moved me."⁷ Reflecting back to his pre-Christian days, Augustine remembers the simplicity of his mind and how various voices close to him, heretical and otherwise, were promoting their interpretations of the Bible as truth. The authority of the catholic church, however, was the means by which one heard the gospel. The gospel and the preaching of catholicity belonged together. Augustine had no intention of subordinating the gospel to the church; he simply wanted to emphasize that the gospel is always received in the context of the church's catholic preaching (i.e., the tradition). What better place to hear the exposition of biblical meaning than within the faith, nourished and structured according to the Bible?

6. David Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Theology Today* 37 (1980-81): 27-38.

7. Augustine, *Against the Fundamental Epistle of Marci* 6.

Finally, let me say that the patristic faces evangelicals will meet in the hallway of common ground will not all be familiar or comfortable. Clearly, the ancient Christians had ways of expressing themselves and their times that are unfamiliar to us today. Moreover, there are some foreign aspects of the patristic church to which evangelicals are unaccustomed (e.g., asceticism as a preferred way of spirituality, the powers of saints, or the allegorical use of Scripture). Contrary to the view that the early fathers represent a sort of proto-Protestantism, evangelicals will find and should find some wholly unique features of the patristic church that will not be easily squared with their free church perspective. A reader may look in vain to find a teaching or a practice in the early church that offers a precedent for a contemporary religious teaching or practice. The intention of the early church was not to be user-friendly, much less seeker-sensitive,⁸ but it does offer the means for transformation if the seeker will seek, knock, and ask. In effect, that is what this book has been about: unraveling the intention and inferences of the tradition so that readers will be better equipped to understand the early church on its own terms.

As a living and dynamic aspect of the Christian faith, the church's tradition is always in the process of development, while providing stability in its canonical aspects. It has functioned as a kind of ongoing conversation that the church has had with itself for over two millennia, enabled by the Holy Spirit. The perennial flexibility and constancy of tradition (or traditioning) enable the church to address contemporary culture with the good news of the gospel. The article produced during Vatican II known as *Dei Verbum* states this progressive dynamic most usefully:

This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke 2:19, 51), through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience. . . . For as the centuries succeed one

8. Robert Wilken observes that in the patristic church's own day various of its aspects were quite different from what the pagans had experienced in Roman culture. The stress on doctrine, the liturgy of the dying and rising God in the flesh, and the resurrection of the dead were for pagans "a wholly different world than they were used to" (Robert Wilken, "Roman Redux," *Christian History* 17, no. 1 [1998]: 44).

another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.⁹

Because it is a living entity, the church's tradition articulated over the ages is also subject to reform and renewal—a point on which Roman Catholics and evangelicals generally agree.

In the end, a reception to the ancient tradition enables a believer to determine where the centerpoints of the faith lie and how to distinguish the essential aspects of the faith from the more ephemeral. Making this distinction has always been difficult for Christians and has often been behind the schisms and splits throughout the church's history. But to learn of the fathers and the tradition is to grasp these essentials; it is to become sensitized to the *sensus catholicus*, the sense of what is truly Christian. From this the Christian will greatly benefit in distinguishing what is necessary from what is peripheral or merely trendy.¹⁰ Amid its marvelous diversity, the canonical tradition reveals the consensus and unanimity within the church. Like a row of lamps posted along a winding lane, it continues to illuminate the way of Christian faithfulness for all future pilgrims.

9. *Dei Verbum*, II.8, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W. Abbott (New York: Association Press, 1966), 116.

10. Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1985), 18.