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Tradition and Christian Faith Tertullian and the Early Christian View of Tradition

ROBERT L. WILKEN

I

The term tradition enters the Christian vocabulary in apostolic times.¹ From earliest days it has ranked in importance

¹ The literature on the topic of tradition is boundless, particularly because of the intense interest in the relation between Scripture and tradition in ecumenical discussion in recent years. Of the works on tradition in the early church the following should be noted: D. van den Eynde, *Les Normes de L'Enseignement chrétien dans la littérature patristique des trois premiers siècles* (Gembloux—Paris, 1933); E. Flessman-van Leer, *Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church* (Assen, 1954); Hans F. von Campenhausen, *Kirchliches Amt und geistliche Vollmacht* (Tübingen, 1953), especially pp. 163—195; R. P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (Philadelphia, 1962); H. E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth* (London, 1954), pp. 307—386; G. L. Prestige, "Tradition, or the Scriptural Basis of Theology" in *Fathers and Heretics* (London, 1940); Georg Guenter Blum, *Tradition und Sukzession; Studien zum Normbegriff des Apostolischen von Paulus bis Irenaeus* (Berlin, 1963); J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, "Traditio im theologischen Sinne," *Vigiliae Christianae*, xiii (1959), 65 to 86. This list could be extended indefinitely but from these works one can find all the relevant literature. For the term "Tradition" see the articles on παραδίδωμι, παράδοσις, παραλαμβάνω in Kittel, *ThWB*, sub δίδωμι and λαμβάνω.

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with such words as grace, hope, love, justification, redemption, salvation, Scripture. Already in the writings of Paul it occurs at key points and reveals a great deal about how Paul conceived of the Christian faith, its origin and transmission. At bottom the word tradition (παράδοσις) means something that is handed over or delivered, and its corollary παραλαμβάνειν means the act of receiving that which is delivered. Thus in 1 Cor. 11 Paul exhorts his readers concerning the Eucharist and appeals to the "tradition" he received "from the Lord." "I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread. . . ." Against Corinthian enthusiasm Paul urges a tradition which preceded both him and the Corinthians and which forms the basis for his exhortation.

Several chapters later he uses precisely the same set of terms in discussing the resurrection of Jesus. Citing an earlier formula received by tradition, he uses this as a touchstone for his discussion of the relation between the resurrection of Jesus and Christian faith. "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins . . . that He was buried, that He was raised . . ." (1 Cor. 15:3-4). In both passages tradition becomes the bearer of central elements of the primitive Christian Gospel. Paul's use of the term tradition in this setting has parallels in Judaism, but he has given the

notion a specifically Christian form and content. As to content, Christian tradition speaks about God's revelation in Jesus of Nazareth; as to form, Christian tradition does not begin *ab ovo*, nor at any moment in human history, but at a specific time and place and it is transmitted through specific men and women. According to Paul, Christian tradition begins with the Lord, and it is in relation to Him that it finds authentication.

In the Gospels Jesus is frequently pictured as opposing tradition. In this setting tradition usually means the "traditions of men," which stand in opposition to the will of God. Thus in Matt. 15 the Pharisees and scribes come to Jesus and ask, "Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders" when they do not wash their hands before eating? Jesus answers, "And why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? . . . For the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God." Paul, too, could use the term tradition in this sense (Gal. 1:14; Col. 2:8), but in 1 Cor. 11 and 15 he has quite a different sense in mind. For here it is the Gospel itself which is transmitted by tradition. Tradition is not the opposite of the Word of God but the bearer of the revelation and as such is opposed to the beliefs devised by men. In this sense tradition is almost equivalent to the original revelation and as such stands at the very origin of the church. Paul is not the originator of the Christian faith; he enters a reality which existed before him and which will continue after him. Tradition points back to the divine initiative.

There are places where Luke, writing a generation after Paul, speaks of the tradi-

tioning process in similar fashion to Paul. Reporting on the apostolic council and the promulgation of the decrees, he writes: "As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions which had been reached by the apostles and elders who were at Jerusalem" (Acts 16:4). In this passage, however, Luke is not speaking of the revelation in Jesus but of the decrees of the apostolic council. Where he speaks of Jesus, he prefers to look upon the apostles not so much as bearers of a tradition but as eyewitnesses to the things accomplished by God through Jesus. Thus in the opening chapter of Acts, where Judas is replaced by Matthias, the eleven say that they want someone who has "accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when He was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to His resurrection" (1:21-22). In numerous other passages (2:32; 5:32; 10:39) it is this characteristic of the apostles which Luke singles out as significant. However, as Ernst Haenchen observed, by viewing the apostles as eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus Luke makes of them the "guarantors of the evangelical tradition." From Luke's vantage point the church could expect a long road stretching ahead and "for this reason needs reliable guarantees of its proclamation."²

The apostles also appear as bearers of the Spirit. In Acts 8, for example, Peter and John are said to have come to Samaria and prayed that those who had received the Word there might receive the Holy Spirit.

² Ernst Haenchen, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1957), p. 132.

Luke, however, does not bind the transmission of the Spirit to a particular office. As Conzelmann noted, there is "no definite link in the transmission of office. All the emphasis is on the special part played by those who function prominently in the transmission of the Spirit, not of particular offices. In this way the connection of the church of the present with that of the past is guaranteed; and the present office-bearers are authorized by the Spirit, not yet by any particular succession."³ Luke is not saying, "Where the bishop is, there is the church," but he is saying, "Where the apostles are, there the Spirit is present."

At about the same time as Luke, but in a somewhat different setting, Clement of Rome in his letter to Corinth makes passing reference to the relation between Jesus and the apostles on the one hand and the apostles and the churches on the other. Clement wishes to show that the apostolic order (τάγμα) is in accord with the divine will. The passage is worth citing in its totality.

The apostles received the gospel for us from Jesus Christ and Jesus the Christ was sent from God. So Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ: thus both came in proper order by the will of God. And so the apostles, after they had received their orders and in full assurance by reason of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, being full of faith in the word of God, went out in the conviction of the Holy Spirit preaching the good news that God's kingdom was about to come. So as they preached from country to country and from city to city, they appointed their first converts, after testing

³ Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of Saint Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (London, 1960), p. 218.

them by the Spirit, to be the bishops and deacons of the future believers.⁴

Here there is a direct link between the churches founded by the apostles and Jesus, but Clement says nothing about the "transmission" of a tradition as, for example, we noted in Paul. The apostles, says Clement, received the "gospel" they proclaimed and then established churches. The apostles went out in accord with the divine commission and in "full assurance of the resurrection" and the Holy Spirit.

It would be perilous to draw too many conclusions from these brief illustrations of various ways the early church conceived of the "traditioning process" and the relation between the first Christian generation and those to follow. These bits and pieces do not offer us a coherent picture, but as they are filtered through the experience of the next several generations, they will be forged into a unity. One further instance from this early period should suffice. In the Pastoral Epistles the writer explicitly urges that Timothy care for what has been handed to him: "What you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). Timothy is urged to avoid those persons who "occupy themselves with myths and endless geneal-

⁴ I Clement 42: 1-4 (Robert M. Grant and Holt H. Graham, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. II [New York, 1965], p. 71). See also Ch. 44. We must be careful not to read too much into this passage from Clement. See Blum, p. 49, n. 20, and the citation from Reynnders, "Paradisis. Le Progrès de l'idée de tradition jusqu'à Saint Irenee," *RThAM*, 5 (1953), 163. On the relation between Clement and Luke, see most recently Hans Conzelmann, "Luke's Place in the Development of Early Christianity," *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn (Nashville, 1966), p. 305.

ogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training" (1 Tim. 1:4). As a faithful minister he is to teach only what is in accord with the tradition he has received, "the glorious Gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted" (1 Tim. 1:11). In the pastorals the office becomes the guarantor of the tradition.

These instances from the later first and early second century give some impression of the wide range of views on the relation between the original revelation in Jesus and its transmission to later Christian generations.⁵ Paul, standing close to the actual time in which Jesus lived, could claim that his tradition was directly from the Lord. But later writers could make no such claim. In some cases they appealed to the pre-eminence of the apostles as eyewitnesses of the words and works of Jesus, in others they stressed the importance of the apostolic order, and eventually the office of the ministry became the guarantor of the tradition. In all this two problems persist: (1) How is the original witness preserved? (2) How is this original witness transmitted? And it was this problem that became so acute in the next generations. Building on this earlier experience, another generation of Christian thinkers forged a view of tradition that was responsive to the unique claims of the apostolic age and the continuity of Christian experience after the apostles.

II

As years went by and the church grew and expanded, it became increasingly nec-

⁵ For other instances from this period, see particularly the works of von Campenhausen and Blum. It is not our purpose to give a survey of the whole period, but only to show the roots of some of the ideas that later find expression in Tertullian.

essary to define precisely what it meant to be faithful to the "tradition received from the Lord." From a few isolated groups in Palestine, Syria, and Asia Minor, the church rapidly spread to all parts of the Roman Empire. As it expanded, new forms of organization were called for, greater demands were made on the intellectual explanation of the faith, and creeds were needed for liturgical and catechetical purposes.

As the growing religion dealt with such concerns, differences of opinion among Christians were inevitable. Differences were not a new thing among Christians, but the struggling church of the second century had difficulty reconciling the extremes of the differences of that time. We know of some of the disputes that arose and some of the big names—Marcion, Valentinus, Herakleon—and we get the impression that they must have represented no small minority in the church. The exact size of their following is still a matter of dispute, but careful examination shows that we cannot simply divide the second century into the "good guys" (orthodox) and the "bad guys" (heretics) as though the one group was Christian and the other not. The dividing line was very gray, and no simple rule could be devised to distinguish true from false teaching. Valentinus, for example, may not have been in agreement with Irenaeus, but Valentinus believed that he represented authentic Christian teaching and could claim faithfulness to the apostolic faith.⁶

It was just such a situation which led Christian thinkers at this time to give close attention to the "tradition" from the apos-

⁶ On diversity in primitive Christianity, see Walter Bauer, *Rechtglaubigkeit und Ketzerei im äeltesten Christentum* (Tübingen, 1934).

cles and to give special attention to the "traditioning process" in the church. The question was phrased in this way: How does one know who teaches the apostolic faith? Paul, Luke, or Clement did not face the problem in this form, but their work was to provide the raw material for the answer of Irenaeus and Tertullian and other men of the next few generations. Looking back after 20 centuries of Christian experience, we can see that the question "How do you know?" is indeed one of the classical theological questions. It was a burning issue in the conflict with Gnosticism. It rose again at the time of Nicaea and again in the Christological controversies. It was a source of constant trouble for the medieval church. It burst open with violence at the Reformation. It was at the front of the polemics of the 17th century. Today it stands at the center of ecumenical discussion.

In the second century most parties were agreed that the sole norm for the church's teaching was the apostolic faith, but not all agreed on how one had access to this faith. How does one bridge the gap of years stretching between the mid-second century and the apostolic age? Someone must have been responsible for the transmission of the apostolic faith; but were all who claimed to be apostolic equally reliable and faithful to the original inheritance? One of the first writings to speak explicitly to this question was a Gnostic treatise, Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora*.⁷ The topic here is the validity of the Mosaic Law. Ptolemy distinguishes several levels of significance: the Ten Commandments are first in importance, then that part which

Jesus came to fulfill, and finally that which was spiritualized by the Advent of the Savior: the Ceremonial Law. Toward the end of his letter Ptolemy discusses those things generated by God and concludes with these words: "For, if God permit, you will later learn about their origin and generation, when you are judged worthy of the apostolic tradition which we too have received by succession. We too are able to prove all our points by the teaching of the Savior." He does not elaborate as to his meaning, nor does he specify where this succession took place and how it happened to reach him. From other Gnostic writers we learn that some teachers at this time claimed to be apostolic but believed that their apostolic tradition had been transmitted secretly. It may be that this is why Ptolemy does not explain himself further. But whatever the explanation for Ptolemy's silence, we have here a clear statement that the apostolic faith is transmitted through a succession of teachers stretching back to the apostolic age.

Now the idea of tradition as a succession of handing over or delivery is not unique to Christianity. Significant parallels exist in Jewish and Hellenistic sources. In Judaism genealogical lists frequently traced a succession of persons and the continuity such succession established was thought to insure promises made to the first member of the chain. In the first century Jews compiled lists tracing the handing on of the Torah (*Abot* 1, 1) from Moses to the present day. "Moses received the Torah on Mt. Sinai, handed it on to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the great men of the synod. . . ." And in the Hellenistic philosophical schools there was a succession

⁷ *Letter to Flora*, 7, 9.

(*διαδοχή*) of teachers which could be traced back to the founder. Thus Antisthenes of Rhodes as well as Sotion of Alexandria, both of the second century, wrote books entitled "The Succession of the Philosophers." In most instances such lists were compiled by historians and were not meant to serve as guarantors of the transmission, but in the case of the Pythagoreans the succession was intended to insure the original and authentic teaching of the master.⁸

Christian writers seldom talked about a list of philosophical teachers, though there are exceptions such as Clement of Alexandria, but they did prepare lists of bishops in the major apostolic cities. The converted Jew Hegesippus seems to have been the first to do this. Eusebius reports that he wrote treatises against Gnostics and there set down the "unerring tradition of apostolic preaching." And elsewhere Eusebius says that Hegesippus prepared a list of bishops of the towns he visited to make certain that those who claimed to teach apostolic doctrine actually had credentials that showed the succession of bishops back to the apostles.⁹

A succession of teachers could serve different purposes. In the hands of some it became a useful argument to urge a minority opinion that found only partial acceptance in the church. Thus we learn that some Gnostic teachers said they possessed apostolic tradition, but they claimed the authority of only one apostle or apostolic man. Basilides claimed that he had received his teaching from Glaukias, who

received it from Peter. Valentinus appealed to Theodas, a disciple of Paul. The Carpocratians laid claim to having received their teaching from Miriam, Salome, or Martha.¹⁰ The Gospel of Thomas begins: "These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote."¹¹ Indeed, such interest in private or secret tradition even gave rise to a whole genre of apocryphal literature in which Jesus appears after the Resurrection to impart occult knowledge to chosen disciples. The *Apokryphon of James* is a good example. "Since you have prayed me to send you a secret book of which the revelation was given to me, as well as to Peter, by the Lord, I have not been able to refuse you. . . ." ¹² In response to claims of a private tradition, Irenaeus and Tertullian insisted that the only sure test was a public and verifiable succession of teachers whose lineage could be traced to the apostle. A perilous argument indeed, but it met the challenge head on. We challenged them, writes Irenaeus, "by the tradition which comes from the apostles and is guarded in the church through the successions of the presbyters."¹³

As this passage from Irenaeus demonstrates, by the middle of the second century the various strands of thought about tradition are beginning to crystalize and are put to work in the controversy with Gnosticism. In his major work, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus is forced to answer the ques-

¹⁰ See Hippolytus, *Refutation* vii, 8, 1; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* vii, 108, 1.

¹¹ *Gospel of Thomas* 80, 10—12.

¹² See Hennecke-Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* (Philadelphia, 1963), I, 335.

¹³ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* iii, 2, 2 (Harvey, II, 8).

⁸ See particularly L. Koep, "Bischofsliste," *RAC*, ii, 407 ff.; also von Campenhausen, 174 ff.

⁹ *Historia Ecclesiastica* iv, 8, 1—2, 103. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 1, 1.

tion: What is the apostolic faith and how is it preserved in the churches?

As bishop of the church in Lyons, he wrote not out of an academic interest in Christian truth but as a pastor who was gravely concerned lest the faith of his people be undercut by false teachings. In effect the Gnostics, said Irenaeus, were undermining the apostolic faith. Now the arguments of Irenaeus took many forms, not the least of which was philosophical, as Book II demonstrates. But for our present purposes it is the beginning of Book III that is important, for here he presents the argument from tradition.

Both Irenaeus and his opponents had access to the apostolic writings. Thus neither could claim to preserve authentic apostolic teaching solely because both possessed the New Testament. Both had access to the New Testament, and yet they could not agree. This led Irenaeus to emphasize that there could be no rightful possession of the apostolic faith unless there was continuity back to the time of the apostles. Thus Irenaeus argues that the faith of the apostles is present where there is a succession from the apostles. "All who wish to see the truth can in every church look at the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the world. And we can enumerate those who were appointed bishops in the churches by the apostles and their successions up to our own day. They neither taught nor knew anything resembling the ravings of these folk. Even if the apostles had known hidden mysteries which they taught the perfect separately and without the knowledge of the rest, they would hand them on above all to the men to whom they were committing the

churches themselves. For they wanted those whom they were leaving as their successors, handing on to them their own office of teaching, to be very perfect and blameless in all things, since from their faultless behavior would come great advantage, while their fall would be the greatest calamity."¹⁴ If you wish to find this tradition, says Irenaeus, you must go to the apostolic churches. He mentions Rome in particular but also says that "by the same order and the same succession the tradition in the Church from the apostles and the preaching of the truth have reached us."¹⁵ This same tradition can also be learned in Smyrna and Ephesus. If there is dispute, let us take recourse to the oldest churches and there find an answer. For even if we had no writings from the apostles, "we would be obliged to follow the order of tradition which they handed down to those to whom they committed the churches."¹⁶

III

Shortly after Irenaeus, Tertullian took up the same position in his controversies with the Gnostics and other groups in the church. Tertullian, a lawyer, presents a much tighter argument than does Irenaeus, and he has refined and sharpened the case against the heretics. But we are still very much in the same world. Tertullian wrote a number of books against heretics, but in one work he assumed the task of writing a comprehensive treatise that would lay to rest all claims of the heretics. His little treatise *De praescriptione haereticorum* is the most thorough statement of the view

¹⁴ Ibid., iii, 3, 1 (Harvey, II, 8—9).

¹⁵ Ibid., iii, 3, 3 (Harvey II, 11).

¹⁶ Ibid., iii, 4, 1 (Harvey II, 16).

of tradition in the early patristic age.¹⁷ Written approximately in the year 200, it is one of the most provocative works of Tertullian and surely one of the arresting arguments concerning the relation between Scripture and tradition.

Heresies must arise, says Tertullian, for it is through heresy that truth will be manifest (1 Cor. 11:19). Thus do not be disturbed if heresy exists in the church, for the apostles promised us it would come. Heresy, says Tertullian, means "choice," as the term itself indicates, and for this very reason it is opposed to apostolic faith. For the heretic decides on the basis of his own authority what the faith shall be, whereas the Catholic receives what has been handed on from the Lord. "We Christians are forbidden to introduce anything on our own authority or to choose what someone else introduces on his own authority. Our authorities are the Lord's apostles, and they in turn choose to introduce nothing on their own authority. They faithfully passed on to the nations the teaching which they had received from Christ."¹⁸

Because the faith is handed over by God and then transmitted by apostles and teachers, those who participate in this Christian tradition have no authority to urge their own authority over the authority of God as faithfully witnessed by the apostles.

Tertullian states his case in preliminary

¹⁷ Text in *Corpus Christianorum: Tertulliani Opera*, ed. R. F. Refoulé (Turnhold, 1954) I, 185—224. See also notes in R. F. Refoulé and P. de Labriolle, *Tertullian. Traité de la Prescription Contre Les Hérétiques* ("Sources Chrétiennes," No. 46; Paris, 1957). English translation by S. L. Greenslade, *Early Latin Theology* ("Library of Christian Classics," V [Philadelphia, 1956]), 25—64.

¹⁸ *De praescriptione* 6.

in the opening chapters of the treatise. En route to the main topic he discusses several related issues, notably his view of heresy, but does not reach the main argument until Chapter 15. What gives heretics their right to claim apostolic authority for their teaching? "They plead Scripture," says Tertullian, and "some people are influenced from the outset by this audacious plea."¹⁹ The Scriptures—and here he means primarily the New Testament—are the primary witness of the apostolic teaching and, as public documents read in the churches, they are available to all men. In a dispute over apostolic teaching one turned inevitably to the Scriptures to decide the issue. If Tertullian's opponents "plead the Scriptures," the way to answer their claims must surely be to take Bible in hand and refute them on the basis of the Scriptures. The question would then be: How does one rightly interpret the Scriptures? Tertullian, however, does not take this tack. He refuses to discuss this issue and says that the real issue is "to whom do the Scriptures belong?"²⁰ The Scriptures are not just any man's book. The Scriptures are the rightful property of those who can show apostolic credentials, of those who stand in the tradition of the authors of the Scripture. The issue is therefore reversed and becomes not a debate about how to interpret the Bible but a discussion over who can claim ownership, that is, who is the rightful heir of the apostolic tradition.

At first glance this is a surprising twist, even in light of earlier views of tradition. But on examination Tertullian has taken

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

an obvious step. Like any polemicist or apologist he realized that the Scriptures could be twisted to suit many different beliefs. Intensive arguments on the basis of the Bible frequently produce, as Tertullian caustically observed, "no other effect than to help to upset either the stomach or the brain."²¹ Experience shows that false interpretations cannot be refuted simply on the basis of the Bible alone. Therefore we must present evidence to show that some interpretations are consonant with the intention of the apostles and others are not.

Tertullian then proceeds to discuss this matter by raising four questions: "From whom, through whom, when, and to whom" was the teaching delivered by which men became Christians? He answers: "Only where the true Christian teaching and faith are evident will the true Scriptures, the true interpretations, and all the true Christian traditions be found."²² This is a skillful argument, for Tertullian carefully rescues the Scripture from a kind of "free floating status" and places it within the total experience of the church's life and history. The Scriptures cannot be isolated by themselves but must be viewed as part of the total tradition of the church, and it is this total tradition that gives them their true context and meaning. Here Tertullian has particular reference to the succession of bishops and the Rule of Faith.

His view becomes clearer in his answer to the four questions. (1) *From whom?* Jesus Christ during His sojourn on earth declared openly to His people who He was, that He had been sent from the Father, and what man should do. Note the key word

"openly," which Tertullian will later explain. In contrast to heretics the Catholics appeal to a public and visible tradition rather than a secret tradition. (2) *Through whom?* The eleven apostles. (3) *When?* After the Resurrection. (4) *To whom?* At first the apostles proclaimed the faith in Judea, churches were established, and then in all the world where "offspring of the apostolic churches" were founded.²³ Behind this idealization of the apostolic age we can again discern two chief concerns: to establish the apostles as the first recipients of the paradosis and to insure that continuity exists between the apostolic age and the churches that exist to the present time. Apostolicity and continuity are the characteristic marks of the patristic view of tradition.

Of the four propositions mentioned here, only the second and fourth are in dispute. His opponents agree that Jesus handed on the faith after the Resurrection, but they do not agree that He handed it only to the apostles and, by implication, to them as a group. Nor do they agree that the apostles entrusted it only to the churches they themselves founded. Some heretics claimed a secret tradition handed on to only one or two apostles and transmitted only in a small circle through the second century. But if this is so, there is no way of insuring that what is passed on in the churches is apostolic; how can one distinguish the true from the false?

At this point Tertullian offers two "prescriptions."²⁴ The prescription was a Roman legal device used to invalidate the

²³ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁴ See Joseph K. Stirnimann, "Die Praescription Tertullians im Lichte der Theologie," *Paradosis* (Fribourg, 1949).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²² *Ibid.*, 19.

original suit by ruling that the claims are out of order. This is a clever move for Tertullian, for he forces the opponent to retreat from arguing particular matters of faith to a defense of their right to speak on these matters at all. "We rule our prescription. If the Lord Christ Jesus sent the apostles to preach, none should be received as preachers except in accordance with Christ's institution. For no one knows the Father save the Son and he to whom the Son has revealed him, nor is the Son known to have revealed him to any but the apostles whom he sent to preach—and of course to preach what he revealed to them. And I shall prescribe now that what they preached (that is, what Christ revealed to them) should be proved only through the identical churches which the apostles themselves established by preaching to them both *viva voce*, as one says, and afterwards by letters. If this is so, it follows that all doctrine which is in agreement with those apostolic churches, the wombs and sources of the faith, is to be deemed true on the ground that it indubitably preserves what the churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, and Christ from God. It follows, on the other hand, that all doctrine which smacks of anything contrary to the truth of the churches and apostles of Christ and God must be condemned out of hand as originating in falsehood."²⁵ The conclusion is apparent; if his opponents cannot give evidence of apostolic origins, then they have no claim on apostolic doctrine.

The remainder of the treatise builds on these two prescriptions. He has now shifted the issue from "who interprets the Bible correctly" to "who can offer the

proper credentials." His point is clear. If he can show a direct line of succession between the church of his time and the apostolic church, then his prescriptions stand. Observe that Tertullian is really offering empirical argument based on the evidence of the church's history from the apostles to his time. The apostolic faith is not available simply through a study of the Scriptures, nor is it to be equated with any opinions men may have devised. The apostolic faith is—for better or for worse—bound up with the apostolic tradition which continues in the church. There is no immediate contact with the apostolic age. The only entree to the apostles is through the tradition they spawned.

As we have observed, the "empirical" caste of Tertullian's argument is directed specifically against the secret traditions of his opponents. The heretics try to disguise their own opinions under the veil of the apostles, but they "cannot prove when and in what cradle this body of theirs had its beginnings."²⁶ Thus he asks them for their credentials. "Let them exhibit the origins of their churches, let them unroll the list of bishops, coming down from the beginning by succession in such a way that their first bishop had for his originator and predecessor one of the apostles or apostolic men. . . . For this is how the apostolic churches record their origins. The church of Smyrna, for example, reports that Polycarp was placed there by John, the church of Rome that Clement was ordained by Peter."²⁷ And later, "if Achaea is nearest to you, you have Corinth. If you are not far from Macedonia, you have Philippi and Thessalonica. If you can go to Asia, you

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁵ *De praescriptione* 21.

have Ephesus. If you are close to Italy, you have Rome, the nearest authority for us also."²⁸

The obvious retort to Tertullian's argument is to ask whether all "apostolic" churches actually teach the same doctrine. If there are differences in teaching between apostolic churches, their case is no better than that of the heretics. Tertullian protects himself from this charge by appeal to the "Rule of Faith." At several places in the work he gives a brief summary of this Rule. There is one God who is the Creator of the world, who made everything from nothing through His Word. This Logos is His Son, who was known in diverse fashion to the patriarchs and prophets, who was made flesh in the womb of the blessed Virgin Mary, was born and lived as Jesus Christ, who proclaimed the Kingdom, worked miracles, was crucified, rose and ascended, and that He sent the Holy Spirit and will return at the Last Day. On these points, says Tertullian, all the apostolic churches agree. There is "a single tradition of teaching" and the churches of Tertullian's day are one with the churches of the apostles.²⁹

Tertullian launched on his somewhat elaborate argument to establish his right to interpret the Scriptures. He realized, as Prestige once observed, "that the principle of 'the Bible and the Bible only' provides no automatically secure basis for a religion that is to be genuinely Christian." The Bible could be interpreted in numerous ways and this made it necessary to determine how one interpreted it correctly. Tertullian draws an interesting parallel.

²⁸ Ibid., 36.

²⁹ Ibid., 27.

In his day poets had the habit of taking the verses of Virgil or Homer, excerpting a line here and a line there, and constructing on the basis of such excerpts a wholly new poem and a wholly new narrative with a new sense. This, says Tertullian, is similar to what heretics do to the Bible when they do not have the proper sense or interpretation. "You can see today a completely different story put together out of Virgil, the matter being adapted to the lines and the lines to the matter. Hosidius Geta, for example, sucked a whole tragedy of Medea out of Virgil. A relative of mine, among other pastimes of his pen, extracted the *Table of Cebes* from the same poet. We give the name 'Homerocentons' to those who make their centos, like patchwork, out of the poems of Homer, stitching together into one piece scraps picked up here, there, and everywhere. And the Bible is indubitably richer in its resources for every conceivable subject."³⁰ Indeed, the Bible appears to be more "fertile" than other books for such practice. Tertullian concludes that the proper sense or meaning is only available to apostolic churches.

Taken as a whole, this little book of Tertullian's is an admirable statement of the patristic view of tradition. In it we find the appeal to apostolic faith, enshrined in the Scriptures, as constitutive for the church's faith and life. At the same time Tertullian realized it was not sufficient simply to appeal to the Bible for all sorts of strange opinions masqueraded behind an appeal to the Scriptures. If we are to possess the apostolic faith, we must give evidence that we actually are in continuity

³⁰ Irenaeus makes a point similar to Tertullian's in *Adversus haereses* i, 9, 4.

with the apostles. The Bible was considered the principle element in apostolic tradition. But a process of interpretation was needed to extract its meaning. The meaning of the Bible was to be found in relation to other aspects of Christian tradition such as the *regula fidei* and the succession from the apostles.

IV. CONCLUSION

In Protestant circles the term tradition has frequently been employed to designate "human traditions" that are "contrary to the Gospel." There were good reasons for this view in the time of the Reformation. But the term tradition can also be used in a positive way to speak about the Christian experience. Indeed, in the early church tradition is not only *not* opposed to the Gospel, but it is the very bearer of the Gospel from one generation to another. This accounts in part for the extensive appeal to tradition in the early church when matters of fundamental importance are at stake. We have seen that in the early church the notion of tradition embraced two factors: (1) appeal to apostolic authority and (2) the continuity of Christian experience from apostolic times to later generations.

Historically, Protestantism has based its claims on an appeal to apostolic authority and in this way it has shared the view of the fathers. Only certain extreme groups within Protestantism shunned the appeal to the apostles in favor of private revelations, the testimony of the Spirit, or a mystic experience. Most have consistently assumed that the sole norm for the church's faith and life was the apostolic testimony as enshrined in the Biblical writings. In principle much of Protestantism has also

agreed to the second factor, the importance of the continuity of Christian experience. Certainly this has been the case in Lutheranism, as *The Book of Concord* amply demonstrates with its appeal to the fathers and its claim that nothing is taught that is contrary to the "universal Christian church."³¹

Practice has not, however, always followed principle. For most Protestant Christians—especially in the United States—the only Christianity they have known is their own denominational tradition and its relatively brief history in this country. We are a nation of new beginnings, and the churches share an outlook which is characteristic of new beginnings. Leaping over the centuries to the apostolic age, American Christians have frequently claimed to restore primitive and pristine Christianity to the American frontier. In this scheme tradition usually designated that which was not apostolic, Biblical, or primitive. Tradition encompassed that which had come *after* the apostles in the form of the accumulation of additions, modifications, and perversions of the faith during the course of the church's history. *Sola scriptura* stood as an ensign to this conviction.

The fathers of the early church, too, believed in *sola scriptura*, but they meant by it something quite different from that which post-Reformation Protestantism has meant when it used this expression. The fathers recognized that the Scriptures were the norm in matters of faith and life, but they insisted that the Scriptures had to be interpreted in the light of the totality of Christian tradition. For tradition did not

³¹ Augsburg Confession, xx and xxi.

signify that which arose after the Bible. It signified the Biblical faith itself.

Writes Prestige: "When they [the fathers] wished to refer to the accumulating wisdom of philosophically grounded Christianity they called it, not *paradosis*, but *didascalia* or teaching. The word *paradosis* they reserved in its strict sense for something yet more fundamental, something that depended not merely on divine guidance, but on divine action. And so far were they from distinguishing tradition from the deposit of faith or from the contents of the Bible, that, broadly speaking, it signified to them the actual divine revelation, the substance of which was to be found set forth in Scripture and, with certain simple qualifications, nowhere else."³²

The patristic view of tradition is not without its problems. Just because a bishop stood in succession from the apostles did not guarantee that he preserved the apostolic faith, as later developments were to show.³³ But if the succession of bishops was no sure sign of apostolic faith, neither

was the possession of the Scriptures, as Tertullian realized. Taken in isolation, neither bishop, nor Scripture, nor creed was a sure sign of apostolic identity. But this is to miss the point. What the fathers are saying is that any Christian claim which abstracts the present from the past or which attempts to locate Christian identity in one facet of the tradition finally robs the church of that which it sought to preserve. There is a wholeness here. The Scriptures, the succession of bishops, the Rule of Faith—all belong together as aspects of the one tradition and are not independent units set off against one another. In the early church the appeal to tradition was always an appeal to the "once for all" character of Christian revelation as enshrined in the apostolic Scriptures as well as to the continuing presence of God in each Christian generation.³⁴

What could be clearer proof of our faith than that we were brought up by our grandmother, a blessed woman . . . by whom we were taught the sayings of the most blessed Gregory . . . and who moulded and formed us while still young in the doctrines of piety. (Ep. 204, 6)

Gettysburg, Pa.

³² Prestige, p. 6.

³³ For the difficulty of the argument from tradition in the later patristic period, see Robert L. Wilken, "Tradition, Exegesis and the Christological Controversies," *Church History*, XXXIV (1965), 123—145.

³⁴ There is an interesting passage in one of Basil's letters where he appeals to his family as a sign of the continuity of Christian experience.