

(I venture to produce yet another paper on Tradition. Hitherto I have had to express my view by somewhat negative criticisms of other papers. If I now try to express my own view as positively as possible, perhaps it may not seem so far removed from what others have written. I believe that Roman Catholics and Methodists do indeed have here a great deal in common, but I believe that there is also a difference which we must try to define more carefully. I also think that we cannot treat it in isolation from other subjects such as the Limits of the Church, the nature of ecumenical dialogue, the authority of General Councils, and so on. What follows is my idea of how a consensus paper might go: I submit it for your comment and correction.)

A paper prepared for the Methodist/Roman Catholic dialogue in Great Britain

1. The words and acts of Jesus Christ, seen against the background of the history of Israel, constitute the good news, the message (kerygma) which his followers, the Christian church, proclaim and thus hand on. But the significance of his acts cannot be wholly reduced to propositions, nor does Christian faith consist primarily in assent to propositions. This handing on (paradosis, translated tradition) of the kerygma was at first oral, but eventually it found written expression in various writings, e.g. the four gospels and certain letters, e.g. those of St. Paul. Thus the oral tradition preceded the writings, but the words and events recorded had preceded the oral tradition. Even if we take the view that none of these writings comes directly from one of Jesus's immediate followers, at least most of the writers had known eye-witnesses personally. Thus for a historian these documents, however we exactly list them, constitute primary sources for the investigation of the origin of the Christian church. Centuries later the church drew up a precise list, the canon, and ascribed authority to canonical scripture, claiming that the writers were inspired by God. Under the title 'New Testament' these books were set alongside the Old Testament, to which a similar authority was attached. The two together constitute sacred scripture. Though there may be some fragments of information about Jesus outside the New Testament canon, e.g. in so-called apocryphal gospels, the canonical writings are for the most part the nearest we can get to the origins of the church.

2. The church down the centuries has continued to hand on this same message, using scripture as a basis, but in its customs, e.g. its liturgies, its writings and its whole life it has produced a great mass of other material.

3. The position is complicated by the divisions which have occurred among Christians. A multiplicity of bodies, claiming to belong to the one church, have drawn on the general traditions common to them all, but have then introduced traditions of their own.

4. At the time of the Reformation Roman Catholics and Protestants were divided, among other things, by their view of authority. Roman Catholics, at the Council of Trent, gave authority to both scripture and tradition; many Protestants, to scripture alone (sola scriptura).

5. Today Christians try to overcome such differences. The Faith and Order Conference at Lund in 1952 took the view that the period of comparative ecclesiology was past. In a 'word to the Churches' they reported: 'We have seen clearly that we can make no real advance towards unity if we only compare our several conceptions of the nature of the Church and the traditions in which they are embodied'. They recommended that in future Faith and Order should treat the Church 'in close relation both to the doctrine of Christ and to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit' (Lund, pp.15, 22, quoted in The Ecumenical Advance, ed. H. E. Fey, p.151.).

The Faith and Order Conference at Montreal in 1964 devoted much energy to a discussion of tradition, and it was then widely felt that the problem had been solved. It is true that the Roman Catholic Church had still not at that time joined the Commission on Faith and Order as it subsequently did, but it was felt that the findings of Montreal were in striking agreement with the new formulations about tradition which came in the same period from the Second Vatican Council. Yet, though the Montreal Conference made useful clarifications, it is not clear that they solved all the problems; indeed they did not claim to have done so. The issue has arisen again in some of the bilateral dialogues and in some of the responses to Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry, produced by the W.C.C. Commission on Faith and Order, in which the Roman Catholic Church is now fully a participant.

6. The question is one of peculiar difficulty. We normally approach a theological question on the basis of certain criteria, such as either scripture or scripture and tradition or some more fully defined account of these and their relations; but here our initial problem is to define the criteria. By what criterion do we do this? If we start from scripture alone, the scripture itself, e.g. in its teaching about the Holy Spirit, may be held to point to the importance of tradition; if we include tradition, then the tradition of some churches seems to point back to scripture alone.

7. The Methodist Church of Great Britain is bound by the doctrinal clauses of the Deed of Union, made in 1932 when the Church was constituted out of the various bodies which had preceded it. The first three paragraphs are

of the Deed of Union 'The Conference shall be the final authority within the Methodist Church with regard to all questions concerning the interpretation of its doctrines'. In each church the body or person making the decision has regard to the general mind of the church, the sensus fidelium.

11. We now consider in more detail what is contained in documents to which we have referred. The Roman Catholic Church, as we have seen, holds that 'These things are to be believed by divine and catholic faith which are contained in the word of God as it has been written or handed down by tradition' (Canon 750). 'Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal feelings of devotion and reverence' (Dei Verbum, section 9). The Methodist Church, as we have seen, acknowledges the revelation recorded in scripture as the supreme rule of faith and practice; and though it does not use the word 'tradition' in the Deed of Union, it refers, as we have seen, to certain pieces of tradition e.g. the fundamental principles of the historic creeds. Methodists, moreover, like other Christians, in their Christian lives, including their exposition of scripture, are inevitably influenced by, and seek to be loyal to, the traditions of their church.

12. We now ask how this interplay of scripture and tradition, or at least certain parts of tradition, works out in practice. Scripture is inspired and authoritative. It is fixed and easily identified, though it is a collection of books of various kinds. The books, like the documents of later tradition, are time-conditioned and culture-conditioned. The oral tradition may have introduced modifications and developments between the original words and actions and the recording of them. Scripture is sometimes said to be perspicuous, but for most people it has to be translated into a modern language, and much of it needs exposition. An un instructed reader might indeed learn much from it, but Christians are accustomed to hearing it expounded in the teaching of the church. To ascertain its meaning, discernment is necessary, and use is made of tradition, reason and experience. It leaves many doctrinal questions unanswered; it does not answer many ethical problems which have arisen subsequently and it does not lay down detailed regulations for the conduct of church affairs.

13. The rise of tradition is thus easily explained. The church hands on to the best of its ability the original message, but has to express it in changing cultures, and all the time fresh questions are arising, and fresh decisions have to be made, some of which cannot be simply deduced from scripture. Thus there arises in addition to the original message a mass of doctrinal and ethical judgments and of church practices and customs. Those which persist for any length of time form part of the tradition of the church.

The process continues to our own day; we are constantly adding to these traditions. Yet these traditions are not easily identified; there is no precise list of them. Moreover some of them have been found to be unsound. Some ideas and practices prevail for a time and are then discarded. It is not enough simply to refer to majority opinion. As the phrase Athanasius contra mundum reminds us, error may for a while widely prevail. In the end, however, certain traditions prevail for a long time, and are approved by the general sensus fidelium. The faithful need discernment to ascertain which elements of this mass of traditions are of permanent value, and here reason and experience play their part.

14. The question here arises as to the authority of ecumenical or general councils; we use the terms interchangeably. Traditions cannot be defined more precisely by being identified with their decisions, for their decisions are reached by a discerning use of existing tradition, but they provide a convenient summary of those parts of the tradition which Roman Catholics regard as most valuable and as inerrant and permanently binding. Protestants, however, find difficulty in this view, and the traditional Protestant view was expressed in Article XXI of the 39 Articles of the Church of England: 'General Councils may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God. Wherefore things ordained by them as necessary to salvation, have neither Strength nor Authority unless it be declared that they be taken out of Holy Scripture'.

15. There is a further difficulty in determining which councils are to be regarded as truly general or ecumenical. Even in the early Church it was not always clear at the time which councils were to be considered authoritative. One indication of a council's authority is the subsequent reception of its decisions by the church. The doctrine of reception is now being helpfully developed (e.g. Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission Final Report, pp. 71-72, 94-95; Towards a Statement on the Church, Report of the Joint Commission between the Roman Catholic Church and World Methodist Council 1982-1986 fourth series, sections 63-75, especially 72). But councils often come to a decision only by a majority; and then the defeated minority, unable to accept the decision, may leave and found a new body, which is then ignored by the larger body because it is not regarded as part of the true church; the decision of the majority is of course received by those who remain. The smaller body is not invited to subsequent councils. To put the problem another way, in trying to discern what is the sound tradition of the church, we need to determine who constitute the church. The Roman Catholic Church holds that the holy catholic church 'subsists in the Catholic Church which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him' (Dogmatic

expressions then became traditions acceptable to both churches. Other matters of belief remain undecided in both churches. The statements of the Methodist Conference on Faith and Order offer guidance which does not claim to be inerrant, nor do many statements of the Roman Catholic Church, including even many made by the Pope. Those, however, who teach the official doctrine of their church in either of our churches must not teach officially what contradicts such statements. The Roman Catholic Church, however, through general councils and the Pope, has continued to make binding doctrinal decisions as to the essence of the faith; and to this subject we shall return. What we have said about doctrinal judgments applies in general also to judgments on moral issues, though these bear somewhat differently on the actual conduct both of corporate bodies and of individuals.

19. Secondly, matters of practice have to be decided e.g. matters connected with the ministry and the sacraments. In both churches some of these are held to be laid down by divine law e.g. in the Methodist Church 'The Methodist Church recognises two sacraments namely baptism and the Lord's Supper as of Divine Appointment and of perpetual obligation of which it is the privilege and duty of members of The Methodist Church to avail themselves.' (Deed of Union, one of the doctrinal clauses referred to but not quoted above). The appointment presumably refers to the scriptural narratives of their institution. The Methodist Church also regards certain other matters as determined by scripture, e.g. certain general principles about the Christian ministry, though not the detailed forms of it. In the Roman Catholic Church a much wider range of practices are said to be authorized iure divino. In both churches many other matters are simply settled by later ecclesiastical decisions, e.g. liturgical forms, which, though they should be harmonious with scripture and may draw on tradition, may be altered e.g. to suit changing cultures. This subject is handled in Anglican Article XXXIV of the Traditions of the Church. John Wesley abridged and modified the Articles, omitting some, but he retained this one: it is XXII in his version. It is, however, interesting that he avoided the word 'Traditions' by altering 'Traditions of the Church' to 'Rites and Ceremonies of Churches', and altering 'Traditions' to 'rites' in the text of it. There are other small changes. The Articles have no authority in British Methodism, though they still retain some in the United Methodist Church of America. They throw light, however, on the mind of John Wesley and constitute a part, albeit a minor one, of the Methodist tradition. The Wesleyan Article is:

XXII. Of the Rites and Ceremonies of Churches.

It is not necessary that rites and ceremonies should in all places be the same, or exactly alike; for they have been always different, and may be changed according to the diversity

of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's word. Whosoever, through his private judgment, willingly and purposely doth openly break the rites and ceremonies of the church to which he belongs, which are not repugnant to the word of God, and are ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly, that others may fear to do the like, as one that offendeth against the common order of the church, and woundeth the consciences of weak brethren.

Every particular church may ordain, change, or abolish rites and ceremonies, so that all things may be done to edification.

Despite its quaint wording, its emphasis on ^{the} authority of the church is presumably acceptable to both churches, as also its insistence that nothing must be done that is repugnant to the word of God i.e. to scripture. Its comment on private judgment needs to be related to what we said earlier about conscience.

20. Despite this considerable agreement, there are still certain unresolved areas of disagreement, which vitally affect relations between our two churches. The Roman Catholic church would think that a custom which began before even the earliest general council and which was accepted in all parts of the church for some centuries is now a binding part of the tradition. A clear example is monepiscopacy together with the threefold ministry. The British Methodist Church would say that though the names bishop, presbyter and deacon occur in scripture, yet the threefold system, involving monepiscopacy, is not laid down in scripture. Because of the weight of tradition, it deserves great respect, and British Methodism in certain circumstances would be willing to adopt it. But like several other Protestant churches the British Methodist Church has not adopted it, and even if it did so, would not regard it as of the esse of the church.

21. The same difficulty arises, a fortiori, about many of the judgments of later ecumenical councils and of the Pope. Some of those made in the last two centuries afford particular difficulty. Leaving aside the judgment about infallibility in 1870, we have examples in the proclamation of the Mariological dogmas, the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and the assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1950. Roman Catholics may maintain that these are somehow necessary to safeguard the scriptural faith, just as homousios was declared to be at Nicaea, or that they are a legitimate development of a line of thought which begins in scripture, but it is difficult to maintain that they can be proved from scripture; or if that is maintained, Methodists are not convinced that they can be so proved. Thus from the Methodist point of view, whether they are true or not, they are not regarded as