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There are two musical situations on which I think we can be confident that a blessing rests. One is where a priest or an organist, himself a man of trained and delicate taste, humbly and charitably sacrifices his own (aesthetically right) desires and gives the people humbler and coarser fare than he would wish, in a belief (even, as it may be, the erroneous belief) that he can thus bring them to God. The other is where the stupid and unmusical layman humbly and patiently, and above all silently, listens to music which he cannot, or cannot fully, appreciate, in the belief that it somehow glorifies God, and that if it does not edify him this must be his own defect. Neither such a High Brow nor such a Low Brow can be far out of the way. To both, Church Music will have been a means of grace; not the music they have liked, but the music they have disliked. They have both offered, sacrificed, their taste in the fullest sense. But where the opposite situation arises, where the musician is filled with the pride of skill or the virus of emulation and looks with contempt on the unappreciative congregation, or where the unmusical, complacently entrenched in their own ignorance and conservatism, look with the restless and resentful hostility of an inferiority complex on all who would try to improve their taste—there, we may be sure, all that both offer is unblessed and the spirit that moves them is not the Holy Ghost.

These highly general reflections will not, I fear, be of much practical use to any priest or organist in devising a working compromise for a particular church. The most they can hope to do is to suggest that the problem is never a merely musical one. Where both the choir and the congregation are spiritually on the right road no insurmountable difficulties will occur. Discrepancies of taste and capacity will, indeed, provide matter for mutual charity and humility.

C. S. LEWIS, "ON CHURCH MUSIC" IN *CHRISTIAN REFLECTIONS* (GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN: EERDMANS, 1967), 96-97.

## A REVIEW ARTICLE RETRIEVING THE TRADITION AND RENEWING EVANGELICALISM: A PRIMER FOR SUSPICIOUS PROTESTANTS

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*John H. Armstrong*

**D. H. WILLIAMS**

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (1999)  
243 pages, paper, \$16.00

When I first picked up this book I did what most readers do: I read the publisher's comments on the back cover. Then I was prompted to ask a simple question: What happens when a professor of patristics and historical theology at a Roman Catholic university (Loyola University of Chicago) who is himself a Baptist, writes a book on how Tradition (Williams makes a clear distinction between Tradition and traditions as we shall see) can renew modern evangelicalism? My answer, after reading Dan Williams's remarkably good book, is that you have an important work that evangelical pastors and church leaders desperately need at this moment. If church leaders would wrestle with Williams's basic thesis I feel certain they would profit immensely and lead the church more effectively. Let me explain why I believe this is so.

Evangelical scholars are increasingly seeking to mine the resources of early church life and thought. This recent surge of interest in the writings of early church fathers has not yet filtered down into the awareness of most evangelical church members and the everyday leadership patterns of most "believers' church" congregations. The suspicion that such study inevitably leads to something Roman

Catholic has kept most of us from these vital resources, thus from the church's holy Tradition. Our loss is great, and without recovery there cannot be a deep and powerful renewal in the evangelical church. Williams guides us through the steps to the recovery that is needed and assures us, against the way many of us were taught church history, that the Tradition of the holy catholic church is vitally important for the renewal of our congregations.

Evangelicalism has been, as Williams reminds us in his prologue (quoting from Winthrop Hudson), more of "a mood and an emphasis than a theological system" (3). He adds, "And for this reason, evangelicals have tended to be identified by how they act and by what they choose rather than what they believe" (3). Put simply, we have placed our stress upon a few issues here and there. Occasionally we actually adopt a doctrinal issue that is deemed relevant for the moment (e.g., personal experience, inerrancy, the church vs. the world, etc.). We are far too trendy. We are easily moved by the spirit of the times. Williams is in agreement with a number of evangelical critics (including this reviewer) who see social and cultural factors as the *predominant* shapers of evangelical activity today. Where he makes a fresh and most important contribution is in showing us the actual way toward real renewal.

The distinction Williams makes between Tradition, as distinct from "tradition," is extremely important. Tradition refers to "the core teaching and preaching of the early church which has bequeathed to us the fundamentals of what it is to think and believe Christianly" (6). He argues that the Tradition of the church "sits in indispensable relation—historically and theologically—to the Christian use of Scripture and to the development of doctrine and spirituality. This was true in the early church; it is still true today" (6). What he defines as Tradition is ultimately what the English Puritan Richard Baxter referred to as "mere

Christianity." (This is, of course, where the famous C. S. Lewis got the title for his popular book by the same name!)

Loren Mead once wrote that the present condition of the church is the "Tyranny of the New." In this setting the church's energy is used to continually invent and market new ideas. Congregations and pastors insist on new programs, new "how-to" seminars on discipleship, new techniques for gaining members, new styles of music and worship. *Everything* must be new! Mead wrote (1991), "When the new way is considered the only way, there is no continuity, fads become the new Gospel and in Paul's words, the church is 'blown to and fro by every wind of doctrine'" (11). Williams effectively speaks into this present confusion with clarity and power, calling us back to the old, back to the Tradition of the holy catholic church. He does this by effectively showing how we can build a bridge between the present church and the patristic heritage that was lost to evangelicalism shortly after the death of the early Reformers.

But what does Williams mean by Tradition, which he treats as both authoritative and necessary? And what exactly is the *difference* between Tradition and "tradition"? He answers, succinctly, "Tradition indicates the core teaching and preaching of the early church which has bequeathed to us the fundamentals of what it is to think and believe Christianly" (6). By this he understands that the church which is apostolic is *necessarily* patristic (13). We must further understand that

In the final analysis . . . Tradition denotes the acceptance and the handing over of God's Word, Jesus Christ (*tradere Christum*), and how this took concrete forms in the apostles' preaching (*kerygma*), in the Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament, in the celebration of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and in the doxological, doctrinal, hymnological and credal forms by which the declaration of the mystery of God

Incarnate was revealed for our salvation. In both *act* and *substance*, the Tradition represents a living history which, throughout the earliest centuries, was constituted by the church and also constituted what was the true church (36).

Appealing to the Bible alone and to the work of the Spirit, *without* this Tradition, will never ensure orthodoxy. History abundantly demonstrates this observation. Separating Scripture from Tradition is "artificial" and "would be alien to the earliest generations of Christians" (14). But why does it really matter that evangelicals recover this ancient Christian and catholic Tradition? Williams answers this in a convincing manner. He shows that what is at stake is more than historical circularity.

We [must] discover that no amount of creative packaging and marketing of the gospel will rescue church ministry if we lose the theological center which enables us to define the faith and prescribe the kinds of intellectual and practical relations it must 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 theologically debilitating. Our unending search for a Spirit-filled and biblically refined faith has not paid off in enhanced clarity or ecclesiastical unity, but in an increased fragmentation of the church (15).

Williams argues, convincingly I think, that the Reformation helped to reestablish the biblical pattern of hearing and understanding the gospel in the face of a medieval drift in Catholicism. At the same time the elevation of Scripture and the rejection of church authority led Protestants to finally abandon the ancient creeds, councils, apologists and theologians of the first five centuries of the historic church. The result has been a splintering of the

movement into "conflicting versions of the faith" that confuse and even distort the center of the catholic faith. Remembering the past has always been at the heart of vital faith. The Christian Church was birthed in a Jewish context that understood the prophetic message to primarily be about faithfulness to the old ways. The American church has more commonly understood biblical prophecy to be about "encoded blueprints" for understanding the future (17). In reality, the only way to go forward, given our present confusion, is to go back, back to the heritage and faith of the apostolic and patristic fathers of the Christian Church. This is the only way we can truly avoid the whims of the hottest new television preacher or megachurch star!

In dealing with how present evangelicals have responded to the idea of Tradition Williams argues that the essential point of *sola Scriptura* was never to attack *all* extrabiblical authority. He cites this reviewer's edited volume, *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), and writes that "room for constructive dialogue with Roman Catholicism is quite limited given that an inerrantist agenda frequently overwhelms the discussion" (cf. note 15, page 19). This note is a bit curious to me since my volume includes several representations of issues, showing something of a breadth of evangelical scholarship that is not all cut from the same cloth. (The criticisms of the particular essays that are cited are fairly made and, in general, helpfully stated. As an editor I can only thank Williams for carefully pointing out weaknesses in the book.)

Because evangelicals, myself included, have not always carefully articulated the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, as did the first generation Reformers, "the essential connection between the historical theology of the church and the Bible is . . . severed" (23). He judiciously demonstrates that *sola Scriptura* never meant, for the earliest Protestant Reformers,

the Bible *only*, or the Bible *without* the Tradition. (Heinrich Heppe was correct, as I have often insisted, when he noted that *sola Scriptura* meant that the Bible was the Supreme Court for the Reformers. This did not mean, however, that Holy Scripture was the *only* court they used to address matters of Christian faith and practice.) One illustration of this point will suffice. John Calvin, in the *Institutes*, cites the fathers, and almost always favorably, over 800 times!

But where are we in the present moment? Here the sheer brilliance and valuable insight of Williams's work shine through:

It is not overly melodramatic to say that the very content of contemporary Protestant Christianity is up for grabs. We are in the process of radical revision within a climate that no longer assumes the church's doctrines and history ought to inform the direction of contemporary theology or ecclesiastical practice. Ideology is taking the place of theology, and faithfulness has less to do with doctrine than with following a conservative agenda of social or political concern. Theology and biblical hermeneutics have become the domain of the "professionals" whose work need not be advised by a knowledge of and concern for the church. The question looms before evangelicals about how far they will accommodate their methods and aspirations to the present culture before they are no longer able to be distinguished from it. What kind of impact can such Christianity have if uniqueness of the Christian identity has become so fragmented or so secularized that its voice offers nothing different than what can be found elsewhere (26)?

Williams consistently chides the evangelical church for its hostility to Tradition while at the same time maintaining its passion for the Great Commission. Such hostility, he reasons, will ultimately destroy the church's goals in evangelism. He praises the work of evangelical theologian

Thomas Oden, whose arguments for a consensual model (the so-called "steady state" theory of orthodoxy) of the Christian faith are built upon an amalgamation of patristic, medieval and Reformation texts.

He also demonstrates how the Christian Tradition was formed. He shows that there can be no question that Tradition *preceded* the Christian writings. It is self-evident that it also functioned as authoritative *before* the canon of the New Testament was complete. Tradition was expressed in the ethics, preaching and worship of the early church. Clear evidence exists that apostolic Tradition existed in the baptismal professions, credal-like formulas and hymns of the church. One crucial illustration will suffice.

We have an early glimpse into the worship life of the early church in the writing of a Roman governor named Pliny. About the year 112 A. D. Pliny wrote to the emperor Trajan requesting direction on how to deal with the persecution of Christians. In the course of Pliny's letter he speaks of these Christians meeting on a particular day before it was daylight "when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves with a solemn oath not to [commit] any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, or adultery, never to falsify their word . . . after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind" (quoted on 69). What is being described here is plainly a liturgical pattern in which worshipers alternatively gave praise to Christ. Williams concludes, "Here is a singular picture of the Tradition in action; the apparent absence of a written text in no way prevented the sacramental and didactic ministry of the Word from taking root in the lives of these believers" (69). These early Christians did not have to possess all the written Scriptures to worship God acceptably.

In our time evangelicals have a vast number of church

options. There are so many that we now "market" these options in order to attract the crowds. Do-it-yourself spirituality is in, respect for the ancient faith and historic practice is out. Williams is right when he concludes that ". . . only through Scripture and the consensual Tradition will the believer be enabled to find spiritual living that is within the shelter of the orthodox faith and of the church" (70).

But how do we defend Tradition? We must understand that Tradition was what was going on, as noted above, *before* the New Testament was even written. "The Bible is not like a video or a compact disc; it is far richer and more transcendent and, therefore, has to be preached," observes Williams (96). As historian R. P. C. Hanson has noted, "The rule of faith of the Church is the faith as it is preached" (96). The second- and third-century church was "quite conscious of its responsibility to present a coherent message grounded upon the apostolic preaching . . ." (97). This Tradition was not, therefore, a novel set of beliefs set over against Scripture. It was, as Tertullian referred to it, "A sacred deposit in the churches of the apostles" (97). It was not an extracanonical source of authority but rather served as a summary of the essential content of Scripture. The way the church interpreted Scripture followed this "rule of faith," and thus believers commonly spoke of a catholic church. The interesting conclusion to this matter is stated in these appropriate observations:

After the mid-third century we hear little more about the ongoing existence of the Rule as an oral body of truth distinguished from Scripture. In fact, any appeal to an oral-only tradition becomes strictly limited to matters of local church practice. The temptation to link this development with the growing prominence of a canonized body of sacred texts should be resisted as the only explanation. By no means had Tradition become outmoded in the wake of scriptural

authority. Christian thinkers will still refer to the rule of faith and certainly to the role of the church's Tradition, but they will not mean exactly the same thing. By the fourth century, both of these concepts have become embodied in catechetical instruction, baptismal confessions, the language of worship and, later, in the great ecumenical creeds (99).

It is precisely here that Free Church historians and traditions have sought to simplify the story excessively. With the conversion of Constantine many argue that the church "fell" away from the biblical faith. The councils and creeds which follow are thus thought to be tainted and compromised. Until this well worn paradigm is challenged and properly corrected, evangelicals will never see the proper place for Tradition. Williams sees the connection and continuity between the first three centuries and the fourth and fifth centuries as far more complex than many have been willing to grant. I think his case is simply and clearly made. The idea that the church "fell" into almost complete apostasy, as early as the third century, and that she recovered true biblical faith only at the beginning of the sixteenth century is ludicrous to my mind.

After showing how Tradition developed further in the catholic creeds and councils of the early church Williams looks at the views of the early Reformers. He is correct in his insistence that the Reformers, at least those who were not Anabaptists, saw Tradition as good and necessary. What they opposed in Rome was the misuse of that Tradition that had more recently built a medieval scholastic theology that actually opposed the great Tradition. From Luther through Calvin it can plainly be demonstrated that this was the case. The Fathers were consistently cited to show how the Roman Catholic Church opposed the faith of the early church.

In the final chapter Williams shows that the way of

defining Christian faithfulness requires both Tradition and the Holy Scriptures. He writes, citing the work of J. B. Torrance, that

The church's Tradition and the traditioning process is indeed the work of God in the world. This means that we are related to Christ in a twofold way, in communion vertically through the Spirit and horizontally across the centuries through the consensual memory of the church (217).

Both of these are necessary if we would be faithful to the Christian faith as both living and ancient. Evangelicals have far too often focused upon only one aspect of this process, the work of the Spirit through the use of the Scriptures. (Even here the emphasis has been far more rationalistic than we have space to presently demonstrate!)

Williams's final word is fittingly prophetic in the very best sense. My own passion for reformation and revival in the churches is profoundly stirred by his conclusion:

Here, at the very end of the twentieth century, we are in the midst of a crisis within contemporary theology that could lead to further fissiparousness and dissimulation or to a new reformation. If there is to be another reformation of the church out of the chaos of our present cultural climate, then it will undoubtedly come through new and unexpected works of the Spirit, but it will come no less in a manner that connects us to the way of theological faithfulness, moral righteousness, and suffering that formed the Tradition of the early church (219).

I fear most of the calls for modern reformation in our day are far too narrow. They would take us back to Luther and Calvin, but only in a way that seeks to repristinate their arguments without the context and richness of their bibli-

cal and historical concerns. Williams provides, for both pastors and serious lay readers, a better way to pursue theological reformation. His writing is plain, his style is impressive and his arguments are not ponderous. Get this book for your fellow church leaders. Read it and discuss it carefully. It might well be the very resource that God uses to provoke deeper study. It may also prompt you to pursue significant reformation in your own ministry as a church leader.

*EDITOR*