

John Williamson Nevin, an American Reformed theologian of the 19th century, is someone whose writings I go back to periodically. As a mature Christian adult, Nevin made a quite striking confession of the sins of his youth. His greatest sin, he confessed, was that as a young Christian man, he had had 'an inappropriate posture towards the facts of church history'. Quite an unusual confession; I am not at all sure what a psychologist would make of it. The thing that troubled Nevin, and lay heavy on his conscience with regard to his youth, was not lust, drunkenness, worldliness, or unbelief. It was that as a young person, preparing himself to serve his Saviour in the world, he had had a mind that failed to appreciate the meaning and significance of the history, the life-story, of his Saviour's church. This, Nevin later felt, was not just an intellectual defect; it was a spiritual sin. His lack of historical consciousness had (he felt) damaged his spiritual growth and usefulness, and warped his whole understanding of the faith. It was a sin that he needed to repent of in the sight of God.

Now we may perhaps not agree with Nevin's assessment of the exceeding sinfulness of not having a lively church-historical consciousness: or we may not agree with him yet. But Nevin's confession does give us a useful point of departure for our study. We are considering the matter of learning from tradition. I shall take the liberty of understanding tradition here in its broadest sense. As you may know, the Greek word for tradition – *paradosis* – means literally 'what has been handed down'. I shall be approaching our topic, then, by way of what the ages of Christian history have handed down to us. If we imagine the ongoing life-story of the church as a stream of water bursting from a fountain, and making its way towards the sea of eternity at last, we who are alive today are on the very tip of that

stream. What can we learn from the long flow of spring-water that has preceded us and indeed carried us to our present position?

Or to put it in the shape that Nevin gave it: Is church history an optional extra in the Christian life? Is it just a hobby that some Christians are entitled to have, but which can never rise above the level of a leisure pursuit which happens to be interesting to some of us? Or is there, as Nevin felt, something spiritual about the cultivation of a church-historical consciousness? Is there something arising out of our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ which makes the history of his church a necessary and vital concern of believers? I intend to argue that Nevin was right and that this is indeed the case. There is something unnatural and self-impoverishing, even dangerous, about Christians who try to live their Christian lives divorced from any real consciousness of the history, the life-story, of the spiritual community to which they belong, the church of Jesus Christ. And this is a trap into which, I think, vast sections of the Evangelical world have sadly fallen.

I remember vividly that one of the first fruits of my own conversion in 1976 was a new and absorbing interest in history – specifically church history. Prior to my conversion I had had no interest in any kind of history. It was a subject I dropped as soon I could at school. But how different everything suddenly looked now that I was in Christ! I felt that by becoming a Christian, I had become part of a great spiritual community which stretched back through the landscapes of time to Christ himself. I wanted to know all about it. In the providence of God I swiftly discovered Henry Bettenson's two volumes on *The Early and Later Christian Fathers*, and G.R.Elton's book on *Reformation Europe*. So I was immersed almost from the word 'go' in the early church fathers

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and the Reformers. Those people and their deeds and writings came alive for me, taught me, challenged me, inspired me; I acquired a host of new friends and mentors: Irenaeus of Lyons, Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther, Peter Martyr, John Calvin.

But how disappointed I was to be when I found that hardly any of my fellow Christians knew to whom or to what I was referring. ‘Cyril of Alexandria? The Monophysites? Philip Melancthon? The Augsburg Confession? What are you talking about?’ I encountered a general absence of history among others: an almost complete mental vacuum, where the historical consciousness of the church’s life-story ought to have been. The basic Evangelical outlook seemed to be limited to the individual and his personal relationship with Christ, coloured by local church life and the latest Christian paperbacks. But as for the universal and historical church – she did not seem to be much in evidence. What had gone wrong? Had anything gone wrong? What was the value of a historical consciousness?

Let us pursue our reflections on this matter with a quotation from C.S. Lewis. Lewis was speaking about the study of literature, but his comments have a strong bearing on church history too.

The true aim of literary studies,’ Lewis wrote, ‘is to lift the student out of his provincialism by making him the spectator, if not of all, yet of much, time and existence. The student, or even the schoolboy, who has been brought by good teachers to meet the past where alone the past still lives, is taken out of the narrowness of his own age and class into a more public world.’<sup>1</sup>

‘Provincialism’. ‘The narrowness of our own age and class’. Surely one of the greatest dangers in the Christian life is to allow ourselves to be swamped by the present. We are constantly bombarded from every side by propaganda on behalf of the values,

beliefs, and practices of whatever happens to be the present fashion. Francis Schaeffer used to speak about ‘the present form of the world spirit’. Most people are dominated by that spirit of the present; all of us are affected by it, whether we like it or not. We might have thought that the remedy was to read the Bible and allow the unchanging truths of the Gospel to cleanse and shape our minds. Of course, that is indeed at least part of the remedy. Yet there is a fashion in the church as well as in the world. And we tend to read the Bible through the distorting lens of whatever happens to be the present Christian or Evangelical or Reformed fashion. So unless we are endowed with an extreme independence of mind, even our understanding of the Scriptures is likely to be cramped, censored, and skewed by what C.S. Lewis calls the provincialism and narrowness of our own age and class.

You may know the humorous but rather devastating criticism that was made of the liberal theologians of a previous generation, those enlightened scholars who set aside the Jesus of the Scriptures and went off on a quest for the real Jesus, the so-called historical Jesus. One critic remarked that these liberal gentlemen, in their search to discover, the real Jesus (whom they supposed to be different from the Biblical Jesus) were like men peering down into a deep well trying to see the ‘true Jesus’, and merely seeing at the bottom a reflection of their own faces. The terrible danger for us in reading the Bible as Christians, of whatever colour on the Christian spectrum, is that all we will find in the Bible is a reflection of our own faces – a reflection of what our brand of church life already believed and practised. And so Scripture merely serves to confirm all our prejudices.

This is where I think a historical consciousness of the church’s life-story can be very liberating. By

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exposing ourselves to other periods, other ages in the history of the church, we can – doubtless not perfectly, but to a large degree – be set free from the tyranny of present-day spiritual fashions. As those who have visited the early church, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, we come back to our own century with a new sense of poise and perspective. We look at our own Christianity and our own church life, no longer as prisoners of the present, but as freemen of history: seasoned travellers, who have seen and heard many marvellous things, and who can now evaluate the peculiar customs of our own time-zone from a larger standpoint. By learning how other Christians in other very different epochs understood and applied the faith, we are empowered to see aspects of Biblical truth or practice that simply never struck us before, but which were blindingly obvious to a previous age; we are inspired to ask questions we would never have thought of by ourselves, but which in a previous age were the burning questions of the hour; we are provoked and stimulated to reflect on what in our Christianity really is timeless truth, and what is just a passing fashion of our own day, which perhaps future generations will be amazed at.

Let me quote from C.S. Lewis again. He is speaking about our choice of Christian books to read:

‘Our upbringing and the whole atmosphere of the world we live in make it certain that our main temptation will be that of yielding to winds of doctrine, not that of ignoring them. We are not at all likely to be hidebound: we are very likely indeed to be slaves of fashion. If one has to choose between reading the new books and reading the old, one must choose the old: not because they are necessarily better, but because they contain precisely those truths of which our own age is neglectful. The standard of permanent Christianity must be kept clear in our minds, and it is against that standard that we must test all

contemporary thought. In fact, we must at all costs not move with the times. We serve One who said, Heaven and earth shall move with the times, but My words shall not move with the times.’<sup>2</sup>

Lewis here argues for the value of reading the old books because ‘they contain precisely those truths of which our own age is neglectful.’ Surely he is right. Indeed, we could extend his argument to cover morality as well as truth. Just as different ages tend to emphasise some truths and neglect others, they equally tend to emphasise some virtues and neglect others. If we plucked an outstanding saint from our own segment of time, he would probably embody some Christian virtues at the expense of others, owing to that inevitable provincialism of one’s own age. We need the corrective of beholding Christian virtue as it is bodied forth in outstanding saints of other ages. To take our pattern of godliness from a Gresham Machen or a Martyn Lloyd-Jones is good as far as it goes, but it is not enough; we need to see the light of Christ’s perfection refracted through a Robert E. Lee, a Gaspard de Coligny, a John Wyclif, a Bernard of Clairvaux, a Maximus the Confessor, an Athanasius, in all their abundant variety of times and circumstances. We will of course be struck by the similarities; the same fragrance of holiness exudes from all the saints. But we may also be struck by the differences, as one era catches some glimmering of Christ’s glory missed by another. Now, to bring this down to earth, let me give you an example from my own life of the benefit of reading the old books and communing with the saints of another age. My favourite period in church history is the early church, the first five or six hundred years of the church’s life-story. When you read the theological writings of the early church fathers, you find that the great thing that concerned them, to which they devoted their minds and hearts,

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their discourses and their songs, for which they were ready to fight and split the visible church and even die, was the doctrine of the person of Christ. Their thinking, their spirituality, revolved around who Jesus Christ is. Not so much what Christ did, or our personal experience of Christ, although these things are by no means absent from the fathers; but the central focus is on who Jesus Christ is – his person, his true deity and authentic humanity, the relationship between them, and the relevance of all this to our salvation. Sometimes this is even made a ground for criticising the early church fathers, that this was their emphasis. But I have found it very helpful.

Let us turn to Matthew chapter 16, verses 13–16: ‘When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” So they said, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”’ Here we have the great confession of faith by Peter, in response to the Lord Jesus Christ’s question, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. He is the long-promised seed of the woman who will bruise the head of the serpent, the seed of Abraham in whom all nations will be blessed, the seed of David whose kingdom will last for ever. And he is also the Son of God, the divine and heavenly Son of his divine and heavenly Father, the eternal Word who has become flesh. The Lord then tells Peter that this confession of faith in his divine-human person has been granted to Peter by the Father; it is a gracious gift of spiritual illumination, by which the Father has enabled Peter to grasp the true meaning of what he has seen and heard in Jesus. And then comes verse 21: ‘From that

time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and rise again the third day.’

It was only after Peter and the other apostles had been brought to understand who the Lord Jesus was, that the Lord began teaching them about his atoning work, his redemptive self-sacrifice on the cross and his life-giving resurrection. A proper appreciation of the Lord’s person preceded the Lord’s own teaching of the apostles concerning his saving work. In our day and age, when the majority of unchurched people have completely lost their Christian heritage and have no clue as to the person and work of Christ, surely the appropriate thing for us to do in communicating to them what the Gospel is (those who will listen), is to follow the Lord’s own example. It seems to make little sense to ask unbelievers to respond to the cross if they do not know who is hanging there.

Who is He on yonder tree,  
Dies in shame and agony?

Most have no clue who he is. And so the writings, the approach, and the theological spirit of the early church fathers suddenly come into their own again. We find ourselves on the same wavelength. Their task of 2000 years ago has become our task today. The fathers focused on the person of Christ: Who is he?

Who is He in yonder stall,  
At whose feet the shepherds fall?  
Who is He in deep distress,  
Fasting in the wilderness?  
Who is He that stands and weeps,  
At the grave where Lazarus sleeps?

Who is he? ‘Who do you say that I am?’ That was the royal star of knowledge around which the minds

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of the early church fathers revolved, as they sought to communicate the Gospel to their pagan society. Surely it should be our guiding star too, in our preaching and teaching today, as we follow the fathers in seeking to communicate the Gospel to the unbelievers of our increasingly pagan society. In presenting the good news of salvation in Christ to them, we must begin by laying solid foundations in his person, before raising up the temple of his work. Christology precedes and undergirds soteriology.

(I do not mean that we should absolutely begin with Christology. In our day it is probably better to start with God as Creator, humanity as creature, and the fall. But when we specifically present the Gospel, the message of salvation, let us first teach people to give a right answer to the question, 'Who do you say that I am?' before declaring the salvific death and resurrection of that Person.)

One of the most destructive weaknesses in much modern evangelism is that evangelists call upon people to give their hearts to a Jesus about whom those people know nothing. Once upon a time, when our culture was at least nominally Christian, evangelists could more or less assume in their hearers some basic working knowledge of the Gospel story. There was a real picture in people's minds of who Christ is, formed by the drip-drip effect of such agencies as Sunday schools and church services, at a time when a high proportion of the population attended church, where (for example) the New Testament Scriptures were read and the apostles' creed was recited. All of that has now vanished. A friend of mine in Edinburgh, who is by no means extreme in his theology, once attended an evangelistic event, and commented to me afterwards that in spite of all the appeals to people to come to Christ, nobody ever bothered to explain to them who Christ was. The people, he felt, might just as

well have been walking forward to give their hearts to Buddha, Muhammad, or Mickey Mouse, for all that was said of who the Lord Jesus Christ actually is. Little wonder that much evangelism today runs out into a sort of content-free mysticism; people have emotional and even life-changing experiences of something or someone – but is it the Christ of the Scriptures?

Perhaps I should also say that we who are evangelicals often seem to have a better grasp of what Christ did than of who he is. Now, it is indeed crucial to grasp what Christ did – but surely not at the expense of who he is. That seems topsy-turvy. Does it stem from a sort of religious selfishness, perhaps? What Christ did for me, the personal benefits I get out of him – I grasp those eagerly. But as for who my benefactor actually is – well, I'll let the theologians argue about that. As long as I'm saved, that's all that matters. I judge no one's heart, but I do wonder sometimes whether something of that attitude may lurk at the bottom of some evangelical piety. Has our heritage of revival led to a one-sided dwelling on the personal, the emotional, the subjective dimensions of salvation, to the detriment of the objective dimension of the divine-human person of the Saviour? Perhaps we ourselves need to expose our minds and hearts to the robust and bracing objective focus of the early church fathers on the person of Christ.

Now all these thoughts about the need today to give a fresh prominence to the person of Christ in our evangelism, and the general perspective which these thoughts embody – this has all crystallised in my mind largely through my reading of and about the early church fathers. My study of the past has helped me to see something which I believe is of crucial importance in the present, in the church's mission to a society that no longer has a clue about

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Christianity. That is just one concrete personal example of the sort of service that 'tradition', a church-historical consciousness, can perform for us. Thus far I have been suggesting the benefits that can come to us from a knowledge of our Christian past, the liberating effect it can have on our minds, the way it can give us a sense of breadth and perspective from which to view the spiritual challenges and fashions of the present. Now I wish to take the argument to a higher level. I shall suggest that a proper understanding of the nature of the church must lead to a concern for knowing its life-story.

Francis Schaeffer was fond of saying that salvation is individual but not individualistic. When we are united to Christ, we are by the same token united to his church. As the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 4:4, 'There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling.' The same Spirit who dwells in the Head dwells in all the members, making the members one with each other as well as with the Head. Salvation, therefore, does not bear upon us as isolated individuals; it means becoming part of the church, being caught up into the community in which the life of the risen Saviour works. Now the church with which we become spiritually one is not only spread across the world, embracing every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. It is also spread across the centuries: a historical community linking one epoch with another. We are one with the saints in all ages. That is part of the very nature of our salvation. If so, it is surely an unnatural violation of what we are in Christ to say, 'I am not interested in the life-story of the community to which I belong.' To say that, or to feel it, is (I think) to reveal a deeply serious failure to grasp what the church is and what salvation is. Permit me to put it like this. Can you imagine a godly Jew in the Old Testament saying, 'I am not

interested in the life-story of my people Israel. The history of Israel does not concern me. Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, King David – who are they to me? That's just dusty old history. All that matters to me is my personal relationship with Yahweh?' Can anyone seriously imagine a godly Jew taking such an attitude? If anyone can, their imagination is certainly more exotic than mine. God's people in the Old Testament knew that they were part of an ongoing spiritual movement in history. They were steeped in that history – the story of their community's relationship with the Lord of time and history.

Surely it is the same with us. That Old Testament river of salvation history flows on into the New Testament and broadens out through incarnation and Pentecost to embrace all the tribes of Adam. We are now part of that history. We too are bound together in Christ with Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, and King David – and with Justin Martyr, Augustine of Hippo, the Venerable Bede, Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, John Huss, Martin Luther, Richard Hooker, and Asahel Nettleton. This is the spiritual family into which we are baptised in Christ. The Saviour has bonded our souls, not just with those few believers we happen to be in physical contact with, but with all the saints in all ages. And as I suggested earlier, we need the wisdom and experience of the saints in all ages if we are to rise above the spiritual narrowness and provincialism of our own age and class (to borrow C.S.Lewis's language). If we fail to appreciate this, I think we fail to appreciate both the doctrine and the reality of the church. The apostle Paul's words about the local church in 1 Corinthians 12, 'The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you', these words apply also to the universal church. We cannot do without the saints who have gone before us.

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In addition to the general vitalising atmosphere of the universal and historical church into which Christ incorporates us, there are quite specific ways in which I think we need the saints who have gone before us. Let me outline three of these ways that relate to theology, or what the church believes. We could look at things like worship and morality, but let us just look at theology as the most obvious example. How do we need the historical church in our theology?

(1) We have the accumulated fund of the church's wisdom in interpreting the Bible. If I come up with an interpretation of a Scripture passage which none of the great preachers or commentators have ever held, and which has serious implications and repercussions for Christian faith and life, it is highly unlikely that I alone am right and the historical church wrong. I suppose it is possible that the church had to wait 2000 years for me to come along and deliver the goods; it is possible, but not very plausible. When I am wrestling with a text, I generally like to consult a historical range of commentaries and sermons to give some kind of ballast to my wandering mind. I like to look at Augustine and John Chrysostom from the early church period, Calvin from the Reformation era, Matthew Poole from the Puritan era, John Gill from the 18th Century, and Jamieson, Fausset and Brown from the 19th.

This is an area in which I think Evangelicalism, especially in its charismatic form, tends to be rather weak. I clearly remember, in my early Christian days within the charismatic movement, being solemnly warned not to read commentaries. Just read the Bible and let the Holy Spirit speak to you directly through the Bible alone, I was told. There and then, as it seemed to me, the entire doctrine of the church was blown away. The assumption was that the

believer is an isolated individual, locked up (as it were) in a room by himself with a Bible, expected to work it all out on his own. Yes, the Holy Spirit would help – but he would only help the individual on a private basis. Apparently everything the Holy Spirit had said to other (and possibly wiser) Christians down through the ages, as they read the Bible, was of no account. I must cut myself off from all that and start again all by myself. In such a view, what place is there even for listening to preaching? Surely the Bible is the church's book, before it is the individual's book; we read and study God's Word, not as private individuals in spiritual solitary confinement, but as members of Christ's body, a community submitting itself corporately to the Word which its Lord has spoken to us as a people.

J.I.Packer puts it like this:

The Spirit has been active in the church from the first, doing the work that He was sent to do – guiding God's people into an understanding of revealed truth. The history of the church's labour to understand the Bible forms a commentary on the Bible which we cannot despise or ignore without dishonouring the Holy Spirit. To treat the principle of biblical authority as a prohibition against reading and learning from the book of church history is not an evangelical but an anabaptist mistake.<sup>3</sup>

By abandoning this perspective in favour of a radical individualism, in which everything tends to be reduced to 'me and my Bible' (which itself soon melts down into "me and my feelings and impressions"), large sections of the Evangelical world have opened the floodgates to everything that is cock-eyed, insubstantial, and weird in their understanding of what the Bible teaches. In fact, in some forms of Evangelical spirituality, the Bible becomes little better than a sort of magic book of personal guidance, divorced from historic, doctrinal,

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and linguistic norms, in which my interpretation might utterly conflict with yours, but no matter, for that is how the Holy Spirit was 'speaking to me personally' through that verse, and we mustn't limit the Spirit, must we? And so professing Evangelicals can end up as thorough-going relativists. Here is the bitter long-term fruit of not having a church-historical consciousness.

(2) We sometimes find ourselves struggling, not so much with a verse of Scripture, but with a theological theme, a doctrinal conundrum. There is precious little point expending time and nervous energy trying to thrash out some personal solution of our own to the problem, if Gregory of Nazianzus or John Owen has already done it. Especially in the fundamental matters of Christology, we have the great ecumenical creeds – the Nicene Creed, the Creed of Chalcedon – to help us. These represent, not the wisdom of one man, but the mature deliberations of many men in the church's formative years. We would be wise to take the Creeds as providential landmarks.

(3) We can test our own positive theological ideas by their harmony with the past. By this I do not mean that we should only ever repeat what has already been said. But is there a continuity, a coherence, between what we are saying and what the church has previously taught? Or are we creating a sheer chasm, putting forward beliefs or interpretations which, in important areas, simply negate the past? If so, we ought to think twice and thrice, and fast and pray, before drawing God's people into something so untried and untested. The church is not a laboratory, and God's people are not guinea pigs. We need to beware of what C.S. Lewis called 'chronological snobbery': the arrogant presumption that our generation knows better than any that went before it.

When Martin Luther found himself at the storm centre of the Reformation, he agonised over whether he was right to bring controversy and division into the church over issues where so many opposed him and could bring strong arguments from tradition against him. The simple fact that Luther did agonise over this puts him head and shoulders above many others who just go shooting off in all directions, fragmenting the church without a single qualm or a sleepless night. Not so Luther. He agonised. He fought demons of doubt.

However, Luther derived courage and comfort from discovering his own deeply felt insights in the writings of others who had gone before him. Chief of these was Augustine of Hippo; in so many ways Luther was merely standing on Augustine's shoulders. But Luther also gained strength from the writings of John Huss, the great Bohemian priest and martyr. 'We are all Hussites without knowing it'. Luther exclaimed as he read Huss's writings. 'St Paul and St Augustine are Hussites!'

He also derived much inspiration from the writings of the 15th Century Dutch spiritual writer, Wessel Gansfort – relatively unknown today, but well-enough known in Luther's time. Luther said of Gansfort,

If I had read his books before, my enemies might have thought that Luther had borrowed everything from Gansfort, so great is the agreement between our spirits. I feel my joy and my strength increase, and have no doubt that I have taught correctly, when I find that someone who wrote at a different time, in another land, and with a different purpose, agrees so totally with my views and expresses them in almost the same words.

There are three ways, then, in which I suggest we ought to frame our theological beliefs in the context of church history: the accumulated fund of the church's wisdom in interpreting the Bible; the great

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minds of the past blazing a trail for us through the dark forests of doctrinal difficulties; and the 'pause and consider' safeguard of continuity and coherence with the past when exploring new paths.

Now all of this is so important that I may be forgiven for dwelling on it a little longer. What I am suggesting in effect is that the broad century-spanning tradition of the historic church forms the proper and indispensable setting for our hermeneutics – our interpretation and understanding of biblical texts, theological dogmas, and any and all proposed doctrinal development. I am aware that this may sound unProtestant to some; and so I intend to spend a little time putting it to you that, so far from being unProtestant, it is in fact the genuine and historical Protestant view, commended to us by the Reformers of the 16th century, and by their successors and codifiers in the 17th century. The Reformers, in formulating the hermeneutical canon of *sola scriptura*, were far from advocating a lawless individualism of interpretation when it came to expounding the message of Scripture. Although Luther, Calvin, and their colleagues were clear that the Bible is the only infallible rule of faith and practice in the church, they were also convinced that this sole *infallible* rule must never be *interpreted* according to the whims and vagaries of the private self. The sole infallible rule must be interpreted from within the wholesome environment of the community of faith.

Biblical interpretation, in other words, whether text or dogma, is in the last analysis a corporate, not a solitary exercise. It can be conducted with safety only in the context of the church and the church's historic understanding of the Bible's meaning. To claim that I can go it alone in interpreting Scripture is the sin of compounded arrogance and foolishness. The Bible is the book of the community before it is

the book of the individual. We need one another, we need our fellow Christians, we need the church, as the proper God-given setting in which to understand and interpret God's Word. This includes the church of the comprehensive time-bridging past, not just the church of the narrow present. In seeking to understand the biblical message, we consult not only present helps, but also the accumulated wisdom of the past – what someone has called 'giving your ancestors a vote'.

This whole attitude is an integral aspect of the historic Reformation-Protestant view of Scripture. My contention may seem suspect, and so I will spend some time examining it.

As a number of historians have pointed out, there were broadly three attitudes to tradition in the religious controversies of the 16th century. By 'tradition' here we mean the theological tradition of Christianity, the historically accumulated weight of Christian understanding of the Bible and of the Bible's gospel. These three attitudes have been summarised by the historian Jaroslav Pelikan (perhaps the greatest single practitioner of the discipline of church history in the 20th century) as Tradition 1, Tradition 2, and Tradition 0.

First we have Tradition 1: *Critical reverence for history and tradition*. This was the position of the more conservative non-Anabaptist wing of the Reformation, the so-called magisterial Reformers, which includes our own Reformed constituency. The church's theological tradition was treated with care and respect, although not given a blind or uncritical allegiance. In particular, the great creeds of the early church – the Apostles' creed, the Nicene creed, and the creed or definition of Chalcedon – were all strongly affirmed. The conservative Reformers regarded the early church's *regula fidei* (rule of faith) as the proper framework for all biblical

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interpretation. This *regula fidei* was of course most famously summed up in the Apostles' creed.

Then we have Tradition 2: *Authoritarian reverence for history and tradition*. This was the position of most if not all Roman Catholics in the 16th century. The theological tradition – or as the Reformers claimed, a biased reading of it – was elevated into untouchable status. It was a kind of all or nothing approach. No development of doctrine was permitted to undergo critical scrutiny, and therefore nothing could be corrected. Reformation on this model of course becomes impossible. One just has to swallow everything: the papacy, Mariology, saint worship, transubstantiation, indulgences, and all.

Finally we have Tradition 0: *Total contempt for history and tradition*. This view found its home among the Radical Reformers, the Anabaptists as they were called in the 16th century. According to this approach, any appeal to the wisdom of the past was in principle rejected. Rather than reading the Bible from within the historic community of faith, one stepped outside, and read the Bible with fresh eyes, as if no one else had ever read it before. The theological tradition was regarded as a hindrance, not a help.

This third position, Tradition 0, is so different from Tradition 1, the authentic Lutheran and Reformed position, that the difference should perhaps be briefly illustrated. Martin Luther, for example, argued that, 'The decrees of the genuine councils must remain in force permanently, just as they have always been in force'.<sup>4</sup> As Alister McGrath correctly argues, for Luther 'it is the *regula fidei* of the church which determines the limits within which the interpretation of Scripture may proceed'.<sup>5</sup> Alongside Luther's normative regard for the *regula fidei* went a surprisingly high estimate of the broader theological tradition flowing from the early Church fathers into

and through the medieval Church. He says:

We do not act as fanatically as the sectarian spirits. We do not reject everything that is under the dominion of the pope. For in that event we would also reject the Christian Church ... Much Christian good, nay, all Christian good is to be found in the papacy, and from there it descended to us.<sup>6</sup>

Anyone who reads Luther's writings knows the huge esteem in which he held Augustine of Hippo, appealing to the Augustinian tradition (Luther's own monastic tradition: he was an Augustinian friar) as a wholesome corrective to contemporary errors in the church. Luther, then, was not a Tradition 0 radical Anabaptist, but a Tradition 1 conservative Protestant.

It was Luther's right hand man, Philip Melanchthon, however, who articulated the Lutheran position with greater precision and clarity. Warning us against heresies of all kinds, Melanchthon says:

Let pious people take note of these examples of rash opinions of every age, let them heed the voice of those who teach correctly, let them embrace with both hands and with their whole heart the prophetic and apostolic writings that have been committed to us by God, and let them attach themselves to the interpretations and testimonies of the pure church, such as the apostles' creed and the Nicene creed, that they might retain the light of the Gospel and not become involved in these raving opinions that, as I have said, follow when the light of the Gospel is extinguished. Those who read the prophetic and apostolic writings and the creeds with pious devotion and who seek the opinion of the pure church will easily conclude afterwards that they are aided by these human interpretations, and they will know what usefulness is afforded by correct and skilful expositions of Scripture written by pious believers and by sermons drawn from the fountains of Scripture.<sup>7</sup>

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Clearly Melanchthon sees the Creeds and what he calls 'the interpretations and testimonies of the pure church' as having an indispensable role to play in our understanding of the biblical message. So again we find that Tradition 1, not Tradition 0, is the position adopted.

John Calvin too, while recognising infallible authority in Scripture alone, nevertheless concedes a lofty place to the councils and creeds of the church as subordinate authorities:

The name of SACRED COUNCIL is held in such reverence in the Christian church, that the very mention of it produces an immediate effect not only on the ignorant but on men of gravity and sound judgment. And doubtless, the usual remedy which God employed from the beginning, in curing the diseases of his church, was for pious and holy pastors to meet, and, after invoking his aid, to determine what the Holy Spirit dictated. Councils therefore are deservedly honoured by all the godly.<sup>8</sup>

In the Institutes, Calvin deals at some length with the authority of councils. The fact that he firmly, even forcefully subordinates the authority of councils to that of Scripture, he says, 'does not mean that I esteem the ancient councils less than I ought. For I venerate them from my heart, and desire that they be honoured by all. But here the norm is that nothing of course detract from Christ.'<sup>9</sup>

Thus councils would come to have the majesty that is their due; yet in the meantime Scripture would stand out in the higher place, with everything subject to its standard. In this way, we willingly embrace and reverence as holy the early councils, such as those of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon, and the like, which were concerned with refuting errors – in so far as they relate to the teachings of faith. For they contain nothing but the pure and genuine exposition of Scripture, which the holy fathers applied with spiritual

prudence to crush the enemies of religion who had then arisen.<sup>10</sup>

Even apart from these statements, Calvin's unceasing interaction in his writings with the early church fathers, and even with medieval theologians like Bernard of Clairvaux, demonstrate that Calvin stood fundamentally in the Tradition 1 camp.

William Bucanus, a late 16th century Reformed theologian, applies the Tradition 1 approach specifically to the task of exegesis. We must, Bucanus says, interpret particular texts of the Bible only in harmony with 'the constant and unchanging sense of Scripture expounded in plain passages of Scripture and agreeing with the apostles' creed, the decalogue and the Lord's prayer'.<sup>11</sup>

The great 17th century Puritan Richard Baxter too has a healthy appreciation of the church context for biblical interpretation:

Take nothing as necessary to salvation in point of faith, nor as universally necessary in point of practice, which the universal church in every age since Christ did not receive. For if anything be necessary to salvation which the church received not in every age, then the church itself of that age could not be saved; and then the church was indeed no church; for Christ is the Saviour of His body. But certainly Christ had in every age a church of saved ones who openly professed all that was of common necessity to salvation.<sup>12</sup>

Daniel Wyttenbach, one of the last of the Reformed scholastic theologians, puts the argument for Tradition 1 quite succinctly:

Be it noted, moreover, that Protestants do not reject outright all tradition: they admit historical tradition, if it is certain. This consists in the consent of every age of the Christian church, or in its testimony as to what it has believed, what books it has received as divine, how this or that passage of Scripture was understood, etc.<sup>13</sup>

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These representative theologians of Reformation Protestantism, then, manifestly operated within the Tradition I framework of critical reverence for history and tradition. They accepted the Bible as the sole infallible rule of faith, but they did not *interpret* the Bible as self-sufficient individuals – rather, as baptised members of the community of faith, in perpetual reverential dialogue with the church’s great creeds and theologians. To portray the very different perspective of Tradition 0, let us consider the views of one of the greatest and most influential of the Radical Reformers, Sebastian Franck . Franck expressed in a sharp, shocking manner the view that lay hidden at the heart of many an Anabaptist:

I believe that because of the breaking in and laying waste by antichrist right after the death of the apostles, the outward church of Christ, including all its gifts and sacraments, went up into heaven and lies concealed in the Spirit and in truth. I am thus quite certain that for 1400 years now there has existed no gathered church nor any sacraments.<sup>14</sup>

Just to make sure we get the point, Franck says of the early Church fathers:

Foolish Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Gregory – of whom not one even knew the Lord, so help me God, nor was sent by God to teach. Rather they were all apostles of Antichrist.<sup>15</sup>

So for Franck, there was simply no history of the church’s understanding of Scripture. The believer was thrown naked on the Bible, as if it had been written yesterday. Franck saw this as a wonderful privilege. The results demonstrate that it was a disaster of the first magnitude, as Franck himself and all too many other Tradition 0 Anabaptists repeated one early church heresy after another: Franck himself held a Modalist view of the Trinity and a Gnostic view of the incarnation. And he was

by no means alone. Having dumped history, these naïve radicals of the Reformation were doomed to relive its errors, in their engagement with an unchurched naked, Scripture.

So there we have the marked contrast between a Tradition 1 and a Tradition 0 approach to understanding and interpreting the Bible. In popular Evangelicalism today, Tradition 0 – ‘me and my Bible’ – often passes for the Evangelical and Protestant view of Scripture. History surely demonstrates that it is not. It is a radical Anabaptist view, not the view of Luther or Calvin, or of the Lutheran and Reformed churches.

Let me close by mentioning one of the greatest problems that many Evangelicals have in fostering a church-historical consciousness. The problem I have in mind, and I have met in myself as well as in others, is an inability to see the church in its official history. What do I mean by that? A while ago I saw the latest booklist from a certain well-known Evangelical bookshop. I turned to the part of the booklist dealing with church history. What did my eyes behold? It was divided up into sections. Section 1 was headed ‘Early church to 1500’ – the first 1500 years of Christian history, from the apostles to the Reformers. That section had a sum total of two books on sale. Two books for the first 1,500 years of the church – which makes up the largest part of the Christian story. The next section was I think headed 1500 –1600, and it contained books too numerous to count. So did each of the other sections, covering the 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.

Apparently, then, the Christian church ceased to exist pretty soon after the apostles, went into some sort of time warp or rapture, and re-appeared as if by magic on October 31st 1517 when Martin Luther nailed up his 95 theses. 1,500 years of Christian history written off! That is the problem:

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an inability among many Evangelicals to see the church at all in the period of the early church fathers and certainly in the Middle Ages.

The result is surely a falsification of the Lord's own promise, 'I will build My church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it' (Matthew 16:18), not to mention many other Biblical promises of the perpetual and indestructible nature of Messiah's kingdom ( e.g. 2 Chronicles 17:11–14, Isaiah 9:7, Daniel 7:14).

In one sense, I can sympathise with this. Much of the patristic and mediaeval period does look alien to our modern eyes. Take for example Bernard of Clairvaux, the celebrated French Cistercian monk of the 12th century. We come to Bernard and look at him. What do we see? For a start, he is a monk; that puts most Protestants off. But then we read some of his hymns, or hymns attributed to him – *Jesus Thou joy of loving hearts; O sacred head sore wounded; O Jesus King most wonderful; Jesus the very thought of Thee*. Clearly a spiritually-minded monk. We read some of the writings he undoubtedly wrote, and find rich food for our souls. But then we read his ardent advocacy of the Virgin Mary as our intercessor whose prayers we should seek. We frown again. But the frown instantly softens as we see Bernard in the next breath writing against the (then novel) doctrine of the immaculate conception. Mary, he asserts vigorously, was just as much conceived in sin as the rest of us. Then we look at his life and are touched and impressed by his moral character. But then we see him acting as the great papal publicity agent of the 2nd Crusade, and once more shake our heads. Finally we see the Reformers themselves praising and extolling Bernard for his Augustinian theology and his penetrating moral and spiritual insights.

What do we make of the strange theological and

spiritual mixtures, hybrids, and coalescences that we find in the history of the church, especially in the Middle Ages? If we are to discern the Lord's body there, as it surely was there, we need some sort of angle of approach. Let me suggest five steps to sanity:

1. We remind ourselves that we often find the same weird mixtures in the Evangelical world of today. I say no more.
2. We follow Luther and Calvin in gladly recognising theological truth and moral goodness wherever and whenever we see it – whether in Sava of Serbia, Raymond Lull, Thomas Aquinas, or whoever.
3. We reflect that the visible church in many ways is like a Christian writ large: a baffling blend of strength and weakness, truth and error, integrity and duplicity. Or if we prefer a corporate analogy, the visible church has often been like Israel in the Old Testament: a multi-coloured mixture of every shade of fidelity and apostasy, with its many seasons of revival and backsliding. We do not therefore despise Israel. The visible church in the Middle Ages may in various ways have gone off in tragically misguided directions in theology, morality, and worship. But we remember that it was the same church that nurtured an Aidan of Lindisfarne, a Bernard of Clairvaux, a Bernard of Cluny, a Gregory of Rimini, a John Wyclif, and ultimately a Martin Luther. The Reformation was really the best elements of the medieval church trying to correct the worst elements. That, incidentally, is the most helpful and historical way of viewing the Reformation: not a heavenly bolt from the blue, shot down into utter darkness, but the best elements of Western medieval Christianity trying to correct the worst elements.
4. We realise that we may be misunderstanding

## References

what a theologian or spiritual writer of a bygone age is saying: seriously misinterpreting his language and theological intentions. Calvin has a classic passage in the *Institutes* (3:12:3) in which he quotes at length approvingly from Bernard of Clairvaux and asks the reader not to be offended by Bernard's use of the term 'merit'. All Bernard meant by merit, Calvin says, is virtue or good works, without any implication of earning salvation by moral self-effort.

5. We acknowledge that some of the strangeness may be our own fault. I suppose if you gave the very best of the writings of a Puritan like Richard Baxter to a modern-day Evangelical, he might be bewildered or shocked by some of it, simply because of that perennial problem of the provincialness and narrowness of one's own age and class which C.S.Lewis highlighted. When we find something strange in an early church father or a medieval monk, it may just be that the defect is on our side, and that he is uttering a truth or revealing an attitude that we have sinfully or ignorantly neglected.

If we take these five factors into account, I would suggest we will be able the more easily to see the living features of the church in the midst of its often depressing official history.

Let us close with the quotation from C.S.Lewis with which we opened, only this time altering it slightly to suit our theme: 'The true aim of church history is to lift the student out of his provincialism by making him the spectator, if not of all, yet of much time and existence in the church's life-story. The student who has been brought by good teachers to meet the Christian past where alone the past still lives, is taken out of the spiritual narrowness of his own age and class into a more public world.' May God help us to discover this for ourselves.

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10. *Ibid.*, 4:9:8.
11. Cited in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Baker Book House, 1978), p.35.
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14. Cited in G.H.Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992), p.696.
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