

Defending the church's truth claims

11. One tradition, or several? and where is this argument going?

I looked in Part 10 at the Apostolic Tradition of the Roman Catholic church through the eyes of a secular historian, so far as I could, with regard to the personnel and activities of 'the twelve' and came to the conclusion that as a tradition properly so called it was defective. I now turn to the faith content of the Apostolic Tradition and the subsequent history of that tradition.

The Roman Catholic church believes that the church from generation to generation hands on the apostles' confession of faith and that through the centuries... the church has constantly confessed this one faith received from the Lord.

Comment. This belief in all its constituent parts is not apparently a matter of divine revelation. One insurmountable trouble with it as a matter of history is that, though it is not to be doubted that the remaining eleven of 'the twelve' shared a common faith after the defection of Judas, it was not the Sacred Deposit of the Roman Catholic church, or anything remotely like it (see Part 8 as to part of the content of the Deposit and Part 12 as to its basis). As a matter of history there can be little doubt that what Peter confirmed to Paul was the original common understanding of all the first disciples in Jerusalem and that the faith was what I have called a no-frills monotheism. Assuming that traditions about coming down from heaven, a virgin conception and an existence before all worlds were already passing from mouth to mouth in communities here and there before they were incorporated in the written gospels we have today, that itself tends to suggest that there was from early times not one set of faith propositions, but several different visions of the underlying reality.

Between 70 CE and 325 CE there was no single tradition, apostolic or otherwise. When control from Jerusalem lapsed, it is not to be supposed that the original historical apostolic tradition died out everywhere immediately; but when the Jerusalem followers were scattered there was no longer one single unquestioned authority to turn to - unquestioned because it was derived from Jesus through Peter the spokes-person and James the Lord's brother. What remained was a whole miscellany of diverging separate traditions preserved in little communities based in different cities mostly in Asia Minor or nearby, but including distant Rome. Each tradition amounted to a conglomeration of a passion narrative, a baptismal formula, a belief in the resurrection of Jesus, an understanding of salvation, remembered sermons, lists of useful proof texts and a mixture of facts and Chinese Whispers about Jesus, all treasured locally for historical reasons. From the communities in some cities written gospels emerged. Each city prided itself on its local tradition, and some claimed on some dubious historical basis that its tradition

was derived from another apostle than Peter. I have tried to suggest the reasons for this diversity under 'discontinuity' in Part 9. The maintenance of different traditions in the period from 70 CE to 325 CE can perhaps be explained in part by the fact that there was a struggle for power and authority between Byzantium, Rome, Alexandria, Antioch (and perhaps other communities) running concurrently with the proclamation of differing visions of the underlying reality.

The misunderstanding of the fathers of the church. It was, I believe, an illusion of the later apostolic fathers to suppose and proclaim that, after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the scattering of the first followers from Jerusalem, there ever was in fact one thing which was everywhere, always and by all people traditionally believed; that is, one single apostolic faith (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum*) based on the common understanding of twelve apostles going back to Jesus. The Church lost the plot not long after Peter and Paul and James had all died. It was because the different communities nurtured differing traditions (and some of them different gospel writers) that a continuing effort had to be made to work out which of the traditions were valid and which 'heretical'. After Nicaea it was possible to heave a sigh of relief and believe that at last 'the faith' had been sorted out. But as we saw in Part 8 differing traditions and different understandings of the underlying reality survived even after that.

Defending the church's truth claims about tradition. The Apostolic Tradition of the Roman Catholic church has served all the churches well; it has faithfully preserved essential old books for us; but, when it comes to defending the church's truth claims today to persons who take history rather for granted, it presents us with a problem. History is against it. What makes a tradition a tradition? A tradition is essentially a passing of something from hand to hand, or from one generation to the next. It is a constituent factor of a genuine tradition that the same thing is passed from one person to another. A genuine tradition is to be contrasted with the children's game of Chinese Whispers, in which it often happens that one person says one thing to another, but the other receives and passes on something different. If we ask what it is about a Christian tradition which gives it its force, we may think that it is because the tradition is believed to have come down from Jesus and to be unbroken that you can see that God must have had a hand in it. A 'tradition' with a big hole in it is not the same kettle of fish at all.

Where is this argument going? It may be useful to pause here and enquire where the argument in these pieces is going. I am going to make a 'practical' suggestion which will seem to many in the church at first sight to be fanciful. I have been trying to encourage people to look at a number of familiar things from an unfamiliar angle, because I think that doing so may make it easier for them to take my suggestion seriously. For this reason I have emphasised in Part 8 that there is not one Faith, but several. Though church institutions are careful not to mention it, this is, I believe, a good place at which to start to look at the practicalities of asking

persons outside the church to choose the Christian religion. Christianity is a religion based on divine revelation. That revelation is believed to have been made in the books of the Old and New Testaments. But it takes two to make an effective revelation and, as matters stand, we have at least four. There are on offer at least three different divinely revealed sets of propositions about underlying reality, all based on the same Greek texts - the Orthodox (without the filioque), the Roman, and the Reformed (Roman without Marian refinements). Once this is recognised it becomes clear that in practice you pay your money and you take your choice. But in practice you do not actually base your choice on a particular understanding of the true nature of underlying reality as revealed by God, for the churches have long since given up trying to interest us in such questions as whether the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone, or from the Father and the Son. What happens is that people choose churches by basic instinct - whether they like icons, or smells and bells, or clapping and dancing, or meaty sermons with a postlude by JS Bach. Sometimes in the course of a life they choose one after another. I am going to suggest that a more principled choice is available. I note in passing here that either the divine revelation in all its detail is important, or it is not. The churches can not expect to have it both ways indefinitely. It seems to me that by trying to fudge the differences in their understanding of underlying reality the churches send out the clearest signal that underlying reality does not matter very much, so long as we are all nice to each other. Given their recondite understandings of underlying reality, I rather agree; but this church 'body language' does not make it easy for us to defend any one of its sets of truth claims to a serious enquirer outside the church.

I have drawn attention to a neglected apostolic tradition and now want to emphasise the importance of it for my argument. If you or I had put forward the 'no-frills monotheism' which I identified in Part 9, any church person in authority could simply have said that that is a pernicious heresy and you are in danger of lapsing into Unitarianism (or some other 'ism' of which the church disapproves), and there would have been nothing for it but to go off into a corner and repent. But a good case can be made for the suggestion that no one we meet in the New Testament knew Jesus better than Peter and James. If any one puts forward another candidate, I should invite him or her to lay out the evidence on which he or she relies. If it is suggested that Paul is in error, we should consider once again the circumstances in which he came to write the letter to the Galatians which is preserved to us. After Paul had brought the gospel to the Galatians, others turned up in Galatia saying that Paul had not preached the true gospel and that he was a liar. The Galatians have written to Paul telling him of this accusation and in the letter preserved to us he is answering that accusation. He is telling the Galatians that the reason why he is sure that the gospel he preached was the true gospel is that he had verified the matter with those who knew best. He adds: "In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie" (Gal 1 20 NRSV; NEB "What I write is plain truth; before God I am not lying). An amateur may reasonably surmise that there are few things, if anything, more secure in the entire field of New Testament studies than that Paul went up to Jerusalem (as he tells the Galatians), that he had spoken with Peter and James and no other apostle (as he tells the Galatians), that he knows that the gospel he has preached is true, because that is precisely what he

went to Jerusalem to make sure about, and that he has confirmed that it is true with the first links in the historical apostolic tradition. I believe that that tradition transmitted, while it lasted, a profound vision and understanding of the nature of the underlying reality; though one that has in the course of history become unfamiliar to Christian people. I believe that this understanding of underlying reality, this vision of underlying reality, could today be explained, defended, and used as an exemplar in a comparatively straightforward way to those outside the church. I think that a generation which takes history for granted (though it may not be very interested in it on a daily basis) will expect at very least that a religion which claims to rest on a historical figure should take history seriously. I think it is important that people should see that there is to be found in the books of Scripture a genuine apostolic tradition, precisely because it seems to me so difficult to defend to a 'critical human identity' the Roman Apostolic Tradition. The divine revelation on which the church traditionally relies is, as we shall see in Part 12, grounded on this Roman Apostolic tradition.

It is, I am going to suggest, urgent to find some alternative way of presenting the Christian vision to serious enquirers outside the church in England, alternative, that is, to one based on the propositions in the traditional creeds. I suggest that the historical apostolic tradition may not only give us 'space' to proceed, but an indication of how the matter was first put long ago when the Jesus phenomenon was fresh in everybody's mind.

What is at stake? So far Protestant persons may be able to feel that, while the argument may be relevant to those in the Roman Catholic church, it has little bearing on their position. That would be a misunderstanding of what I am trying to say. One has to start with Rome, because as a matter of history we in this country nearly all began by splitting off from Rome. All church persons, however Protestant they feel themselves to be, are for all practical purposes conditioned to proceed on the assumption that the Roman Catholic Apostolic Tradition is perfectly good - that is, for example, an unquestioned presupposition of the whole drive for unity of church institutions. But, unfortunately, for the purposes of mission to those outside who take history for granted and put great store on reason that Apostolic Tradition is, I believe, indefensible. We are, I believe, all in this together. It is the Trinitarian propositions about underlying reality which are at stake here. The whole business of the inerrancy of Scripture with its political implications is also at stake. I shall use the clumsy phrase 'clerical persons' to embrace all those who are priests or ordained ministers of the various churches and will consider their position in this matter of defence in Part 16. I shall at a later point in the argument be suggesting that now is the time for every 'liberal' Christian, (however much he or she believes that label to be misleading), to stand up and state out loud his or her position on the question of the inerrancy of Scripture in terms which are both clear and self-consistent (see Parts 14, 15 and 16). I think that it is a question how modern man can envisage that God might deal with evolutionary creatures like ourselves. I am

going to suggest an alternative possibility to the accepted view that He revealed all, once and for all, by authoring certain manuscripts, namely, the possibility that He is still actively at work in the labours of biblical scholars and historians.

In short, I am in the middle of arguing that, if we look again at the Bible, we shall find that we have a neglected apostolic tradition, which in principle we could choose to adopt as our own. I am going to suggest that, if we in England are serious about addressing 'critical human identities' outside the church, we, or some of us, with or without official blessing, might do well to choose it.

Questions which might affect the choice. I would not willingly leave you in any doubt that this is intended to be a serious suggestion. Among the not unimportant questions to consider in making this choice might, I believe, be these: "has God stopped work? is God at work in the labours of biblical scholars and church historians? does the work of biblical scholars and church historians raise serious questions about the received faith propositions of your church? can nothing be done about this - ever? if not now, when? if the church, or even part of the church, were to accept a historical view of its history and a no-frills monotheism as its creed, do you believe that it would be the end of God? or the end of Jesus? or that God would suddenly find that He was left without witnesses? might it be good news to preach round the tired old Western world, as Paul once preached it? would there not be 'space' in which to work out how to do our preaching?" And, at a lower level altogether, "what might this re-think do to existing church structures?" and "would they not thoroughly deserve all that it did?"

If each of us were to examine those questions, we would, I believe be able to see more clearly whether in our heart of hearts we believe that the churches in England 'exist for mission', mission now, not manana. We would also be able to put into perspective any anxiety we may have to preserve the particular church structure to which we are at present more or less committed (as to the profundity of which commitment see under Selling houses and keeping faith in Part 15).

Help in choosing - a 'lay' ministry. Looking to the future, if the voice of Paul as to what was the original apostolic tradition is to be heard again in the churches, a substantial number of church persons is going to have to agitate to get it heard. But, before they start agitating, they are going to have to choose to accept that first apostolic tradition themselves, and before that, the pros and cons will have to be fairly and squarely put before them. A 'lay' ministry of teaching would help here - a designated group of Christian persons not burdened with a general cure of

souls and prepared, after having stood due vigil and laid the body-armour of the ancient creeds reverently on one side, to go forward without fear.

New patterns of division. Many are, I believe, coming to think that the fissures between Christians in the West no longer run straight along the old denominational lines. The division between those who are content to be told what to believe and those who are restive under bondage cuts across denominational lines. It is sometimes thought that there is a sharp division between those who believe in the inerrancy of the scriptures and the rest. As will become apparent, I am not convinced that this division is quite so defined as many appear to think (see Part 12 under Christian confidence, Part 14 and Part 16). There is undoubtedly a dividing line defined by differences of opinion about how to deal with the new faith problem which the work of biblical scholars and church historians has raised for our generation. I think of this as the distinctive faith problem of church persons in the West at this time (see Part 13).

Meanwhile, in Part 12, I go back to consider further the Roman Catholic and Calvinistic position on the inerrancy of Scripture, which, in so far as it underpins the Trinitarian faith, it seems to me we have all inherited, whether as a matter of required belief, or as a touchstone of reference when mentioning underlying reality.