

Defending the church's truth claims

9. A neglected apostolic tradition

The most disturbing thing to emerge from Parts 1 to 8 is that the truth claims which Dr Williams is challenging us to defend are not the truth claims which Peter and Paul proclaimed, not by a long chalk. The Christian faith has come a long way from its humble origins in Roman Palestine. Imagine the Apostle Paul's reaction to what has happened: 'Ah, yes; of course'? or, 'Gosh, I wish I'd thought of that'?

Comparing the faith of Paul mentioned in Part 4 (and below) with the items of the Faith set out in Part 8, it is clear that by modern standards Paul did not believe nearly enough about Jesus. Nonetheless, I think we should be cautious in coming to the conclusion that Paul was not a proper Christian. Indeed, we should hesitate to patronise him, comforting ourselves that God has been kind enough to make clear to us things that He did not reveal to Paul.

Faith is about underlying realities. Though I have written in Part 8 rather disrespectfully of a 'package', the Roman Catholic church does not believe in formulae, but in "those realities they [the formulae] express which faith allows it to touch". Nonetheless it approaches these realities with the help of formulations of the faith which permit it to express the faith. Assuming the same to have been true for Paul and the most ancient baptismal formula, it is, I think, reasonably clear that Paul and the first followers of Jesus did not believe in exactly the same underlying reality as the churches of today. They believed a strikingly different thing about the relationship of Jesus to the underlying reality. It must at very least be open to doubt whether the church's belief that "the church from generation to generation hands on the apostles' confession of faith" is securely based on history, and almost certainly wrong to say that "through the centuries the church has constantly confessed this one [trinitarian] faith received from the Lord". These beliefs, to which I will come, are based on 'tradition' understood in a particular and somewhat idiosyncratic way.

I believe that tradition can be useful as a point of reference and support, but that it does not make an innovative master. If the various existing truth claims of the churches all proved to be indefensible in terms which 'critical human identities' today can understand, we should find ourselves in dire need of a bit of innovation. I want to labour the contrast between Paul's position on the one hand and that of Dr Williams and of the Pope, both of which are based on tradition, on the other, because I want to encourage you to consider drawing some conclusions about tradition for yourself. (The positions of the two religious leaders are not, of course, in every respect the same. In Part 1 we saw Dr Williams trying to give his people some 'space'. In Part 8 we saw the Popes over the past 150 years drawing ever tighter the doctrinal ropes that bind the believer. Paul by way of contrast to both of them had an enviable amount of 'space').

Drawing conclusions. I believe that events have in the past been spaced out over time in what nowadays everybody thinks of as 'history'. God, church people often say, is the God of history. I believe that there is still more truth to come out of the Bible and that there can never be what is sometimes called 'closure', that is, a final, definitive reading. But I also believe that this absence of 'closure' is no longer a sufficient excuse for standing before the New Testament a prey to indecision. There is plenty out there already on which to make up the mind, if you put your mind to it. Everyone inside the church will sympathize with you if you postpone a little longer the decision to admit that the work of biblical scholars does appear to raise a number of questions about 'the Faith'. But when it comes to defending the church's truth claims to outsiders, continuing failure to confront this problem over a long period may begin to look perilously like want of intellectual integrity. Any conclusions we draw are, of course, going to be provisional conclusions; but nearly all of us draw conclusions every day on important matters on inadequate evidence. In other contexts we think of this as part of coming of age. It may be that it will prove to be impossible to open up choices for Dr Williams's 'critical human identities' outside the church until we have first made one or two choices ourselves.

The faith of Peter and Paul. We saw in Part 4 that Paul believed that Jesus was fully man and no more until after his death and that for Paul the 'christological moment' was the resurrection. We saw in Part 5 that for Paul (as for 'Mark') to call someone 'son of God' did not imply that that person was more than human. There is one further point of great importance. The respected New Testament scholar GB Caird notes in his commentary on 'Philippians' in **Paul's Letters from Prison in the Revised Standard Version** (New Clarendon Bible, 1976, p.124) that, "nowhere does Paul take the step of calling Jesus God. He retained his Jewish monotheism to the end." It is worth pausing there.

The neglected apostolic tradition. Paul does not stand alone. We have seen how the church fathers sought legitimacy for their understanding of the 'it must have been' in an unbroken tradition believed to go back through the apostles to Jesus himself. Paul had done that too. Paul understood very well that there was in his day a live apostolic tradition going back to Jesus, the custodians of which were Peter and James the brother of Jesus.

So, when followers from Jerusalem started telling the people of Galatia, who had been converted by Paul, that he was not a proper apostle, he spells out his credentials to those whom he had converted precisely on the basis of that apostolic tradition. It is worth quoting once again what he said. Of his 'conversion' he writes, "God...was pleased to reveal his son to me"; then he tells us what happened next, "I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once to Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him for fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!" (Gal. 1 16-20 NRSV).

Nobody knows what was said between them; but it is plain that Paul was confident in the truth of what he had preached to the Galatians because he had taken the trouble to check that the good news he was preaching was the genuine article. He had confirmed this with the two persons best able to speak with authority in the church, both of whom had known Jesus personally. He had fifteen days of talks with Peter and some talk with James. He confirmed with them that what he was doing and saying was correct. If either the Apostle Peter, or James, the brother of our Lord, thought that Jesus was God they would surely have corrected Paul on this point. If Peter or James had mentioned to Paul that Jesus was God, it is very difficult indeed to believe that Paul would not have passed that bit of good news on in one or more of his extant letters. Their understanding of Jesus' resurrection as 'the christological moment' (see Part 4) did not require a belief that Jesus ever became God. Underpinning the natural conclusions from all this is the fact that Peter, James and Paul were pious Jews of their time. It is almost unthinkable that anyone brought up as a Jew in the time of Jesus would leap to the conclusion that his brother (in James's case), or his former guru (in Peter's case) was God. I conclude that neither Peter, nor James, believed that Jesus was God, any more than Paul did.

The tools of modern biblical criticism and the modern world's sense of history - the sense that the perceptions of the followers of Jesus changed and developed over time - have enabled us to see Peter and James and Paul in quite a different light from that in which they have traditionally been regarded (or in James's case ignored) in church. Paul's letters are the earliest documents included in the New Testament. We can see in those letters the beginnings of a genuine historical apostolic tradition in Peter and James recorded for us by Paul. The genuine tradition was founded on one flesh-and-blood apostle and one brother of Jesus, not on twelve shadowy apostles, whose very names were not handed down consistently in church circles.

Monotheism. It seems that the faith handed down under the original apostolic tradition of the church was not a 'trinitarian' faith; it was a no-frills monotheism, like Judaism and Islam.

The discontinuity - its shattering completeness and the reason for it. That being the historical apostolic tradition as it stemmed from Jesus and the content of that tradition, after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the scattering of the Jewish followers who lived in that holy city there was a massive discontinuity. The original tradition based in Jerusalem was lost. But followers of Jesus needed a tradition and invented several of them up and down the Roman world to meet their need. Out of those many traditions was fashioned the familiar Apostolic Tradition on which the church relies. It is, I believe, profoundly significant that the

discontinuity, the dislocation, occurred after the death of the Jewish leaders of the original followers of Jesus and after the remnant of the followers who had lived in Jerusalem were scattered. It is significant that it occurred at a time when orthodox Judaism was also re-thinking its position and was drawing its own lines of demarcation more strictly. It is significant that it occurred after several separate communities had produced different written gospels to meet their several needs in relation to orthodox Jews in their locality.

It is, I think, difficult to over-estimate the shattering effect on faithful Jews of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. God had required his people to worship in that temple for several hundred years, but now He had allowed the Romans to destroy it. What were his people to make of that? They had to rebuild their lives, and over time they rebuilt them in the form we now know as Rabbinic Judaism. But to start with there must have been desperate heart-searching. Why had God allowed this to happen? One of the profoundly moving things about the ancient history of the Jewish people, as they have recorded it, is the absolute refusal of those who did their thinking for them to accept that God had been unjust. If He seemed to have deserted them, it must be because they had fallen away from what He properly required of them. It can not have been too difficult for orthodox Jews to identify the little sect of followers of Jesus as one of the causes, if not the cause, of the trouble. But imagine the heart-searching among Jewish followers of Jesus. Could it, perhaps, have been their fault for consorting with Gentiles - even eating with them, food that was not kosher? I suspect that some of them, honourable, conscientious persons, may have returned to orthodox Judaism in profound penitence. But what of those who wrestled with their consciences and found that, like it or not, Jesus would not let them go? They were cast adrift from Judaism with their Gentile brothers and sisters to sink or swim, with little guidance from anyone. James had been murdered a dozen years before; Peter was dead, Paul was dead. They had to cling to the memories of their several communities and build out of them their own traditions, or sink without trace.

The ducking of the issue of discontinuity. In any other field of historical study it would be for those who maintain the Apostolic Tradition of the Roman Catholic church both to account for the dislocation in content between their 'tradition' and the historical one, and to make good their claim to trace their 'tradition' through 'the twelve' to Jesus. But not in the field of religion. The existence of 'the Apostolic Tradition' is part of the Tradition of the Roman Catholic church and that church can not accept anything contrary to its Tradition; end of story. The Roman Apostolic Tradition is there, because it's there, because God through the Spirit has so organised things in the past that it's there, and who are we to question it? Much is invested by all denominations in the old unhistorical understanding of what happened; as we shall see, the creeds are part of that investment.

I think that we can take it that, if there was any historical evidence as to the origins of the Apostolic Tradition of the Roman Catholic church going back even to 70 CE, we should have heard about it long ago.

In Part 10: the Roman Apostolic Tradition.