

TRADITION
AND
THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND
IN SOUTH AFRICA

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A Paper presented to
The Clergy & Christian Workers
Conference held at
Maselspoort, Bloemfontein

March 2006

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Introduction:

The present Church of England in South Africa has not been created in a vacuum. It is a product of history - religious, social, cultural history. Whether we like it or not, our church is the heir of several disparate, often conflicting traditions. Although the social and cultural traditions have helped to shape the church, and are deserving of careful study in their own right, they will not be discussed in this paper, except for a few passing references..

The approach adopted in this paper is to consider briefly the idea of 'tradition' in the New Testament, and then to show the traditions, more or less valid, developed in history, that CESA has inherited, the extent to which they presently affect our denomination, and the sort of tradition that we are poised to pass on to the next generation.

1 TRADITION IN THE SCRIPTURES

Paradidomi;

paradosis

1.1 Biblical Vocabulary

Although the idea of tradition is rooted in Judaism, it is not, linguistically an Old Testament concept, and so we make our word-study in two, related, New Testament words, *Paradidomi;* and *paradosis*. The verb has a wide range of meanings, but, in this semantic field, has the force of "to hand down as instruction", often translated as 'delivered' referring to the message 'handed down' to the hearers or readers of the apostolic word.. The noun is almost uniformly translated as 'tradition'

1.2 Usage

1.2.1 "Bad" Tradition

It is an interesting phenomenon of Protestant, and particularly Evangelical, Christians, that the major connotation of tradition is negative, whereas in the New Testament, while Jesus condemns 'the tradition of the elders' (Mark 7:1-13) as being merely 'of man', and

nullifying the Word of God, this is by no means the usual usage of the expression.

1.2.2 “Good” Tradition [All the biblical references that follow use the Greek verb *paradidomi*, or the noun *paradosis*.]

As early as Acts 16:4 the rulings of the Jerusalem Council securing the Christian liberty of Gentile believers, are ‘the decisions’ of the apostles, ‘handed down’ to the churches. Paul describes the basic principles of the gospel as that which he ‘delivered’ to the Corinthians (I Corinthians 15:3), and writes in the same terms of his teaching on the Second Advent (II Thessalonians 2:15), and general Christian conduct (II Thessalonians 3:6), as well as his teaching on the Lord’s Supper (I Corinthians 11:23) and general church practice (I Corinthians 11:2). Peter (II Peter 2:21) describes the apostolic message as *paradosis*, and Jude (Jude 3) the Christian faith as that which has been ‘delivered’ to the saints.

I want to make it clear that when we speak of tradition, the term has therefore no necessary pejorative meaning.

2 TRADITION AND CESA Tradition Inherited; Tradition Held; Tradition to be Passed On

2.1 Tradition Inherited

First then we consider the traditions inherited by the church. In describing these traditions, it will be as well to explain that once a tradition has been named as characteristic of an era, we will generally not repeat it in describing succeeding eras. Also, we will briefly explain the permanent value of the tradition, without necessarily affirming all its connotations.

2.1.1 “Catholic” Tradition

We commence with what we may call ‘Catholic’ tradition, that developed during the first six hundred years of the Christian era. From this period, we have inherited the creeds and such crucial expressions of the faith as the Chalcedonian Definition. The heresies with which the church was in conflict, and the teaching ministry of the church were two of the catalysts for the development of the ‘ecumenical creeds’, which have performed yeoman service for so

many centuries. Then there is the order of bishops. Whatever the later distortions of episcopacy, this system of church government had its origins in the primitive church, and served the purpose of securing visible unity and, for a time at least, preserving orthodoxy. We may also mention the ancient hymns of the church, notably the *Te Deum* and the ‘Songs’ from the first two chapters of Luke’s gospel. These were God-centred songs of praise, with strong creedal connotations. (In passing, it is noteworthy that ‘church choruses’, with a popular jingle, and usually contrary to, or a misuse of, Scripture, were the invention of the arch-heretic Arius! I kid you not!)

2.1.2 “Protestant” Tradition

A few years ago, one of our students described the doctrinal distinctives of the Reformation as the Protestant ‘Sola’ system - probably a good mnemonic device, and reminding us that the ‘Protestant’ tradition is an exaltation of the final authority of Scripture, the Sufficiency of Christ, justification by faith alone, and *Soli Deo Gloria* as the ultimate watchword of the Christian message. These Reformation insights were nothing less than a rediscovery of the gospel, and no church can justifiably call itself a gospel church if these elements are lacking.

2.1.3 “Anglican” Tradition

When we speak of the ‘Anglican’ tradition, we are not thinking of the post-reformation distortions under Laud, or the Latitudinarians, or the later ‘Ritualist’ and ‘Liberal’ church-man-ship. Rather we are looking at that church that came into being as a result of the convictions and labours of the English Reformers such as Tyndale, Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer. To these men we owe not only a restatement of the Protestant faith in the Articles, but also a liturgy, formal indeed, yet purged of Romanism. This liturgy was congregational, theologically instructive, and emphasised the important role of Scripture in the church service.

Another important feature of the English reformation was the attitude adopted to the authority of Scripture. While Lutherans adopted the position that what was not forbidden by Scripture was permitted, and the Puritans opted for the ‘regulative’ principle, that is, unless something is prescribed by Scripture it is not permissible,

Anglicanism took what has become known as the ‘normative’ principle, that church practices must be consonant with Scripture.

2.1.4 “Puritan” Tradition

At a formal level, the English church rejected Puritan ecclesiology, and what its opponents termed ‘precisionism’, but in fact the Puritan emphases of a strict personal piety, close self-examination, and a concern for public morality, passed into the evangelicalism of the eighteenth century revivalists.

2.1.5 “Evangelical” Tradition

The achievements of the eighteenth century revival have passed into the realms of legend, including the prevention of an Anglo-Saxon version of the French Revolution, but for all that, it is unquestionable that the Wesleys and George Whitefield, and their co-belligerents within Anglicanism enriched British church life, and moral values, massively. As for new traditions, we may mention plain, scriptural preaching, a tremendous emphasis on personal conversion to Christ, the need for the powerful working of the Spirit in regeneration, manifesting itself in a life of holiness, and, among Anglican evangelicals, firm but moderate church-man-ship, brought to maturity by such men as Charles Simeon.

Evangelicals, no doubt influenced by the Puritans and the Pietists on the continent, were also deeply committed to the private devotional life - in spite of their multifarious activities they would have felt a day wasted if they had not spent time in earnest prayer and Bible Study. Importantly, as a fruit of their evangelicalism, they were initiators of, and heavily involved in, social reform, both in the area of public morality and the amelioration of social evils. Nor should it be forgotten that the new impetus for cross-cultural mission grew out of the evangelical revival.

2.1.6 “Fundamentalist” Tradition

Fundamentalism emerged in the late nineteenth century as a result of intellectual, social and educational changes, particularly in the United States. Over a hundred years later, it is probably wise to distinguish between ‘early’ and ‘recent’ fundamentalism.

2.1.6.1 Early Fundamentalism

Following evangelicalism's loss of its hold on the universities and main-line denominations, those true to the faith valiantly fought a rear-guard action, and produced a helpful, though uneven series of volumes entitled "The Fundamentals", but this soon degenerated into intellectual and cultural retreat resulting in a narrow obscurantism, an increased commitment to 'Revivalism' in which the destructive influence of Charles Finney became more and more evident, 'Perfectionism' of several varieties, and 'Dispensational' Millennialism. 'Pentecostalism' was a major offspring of fundamentalism, although many fundamentalists have totally denied paternity!

2.1.6.2 Recent Fundamentalism

More recent fundamentalism no longer speaks with a united voice, as fundamentalists range from 'prosperity cults' on the theological far left, through 'market-oriented' churches, to educational institutions like Bob Jones University, and Liberty College. Whether 'Reconstructionists' and 'Theonomists' should be included at this point is debatable. Some of the less attractive features of recent fundamentalism, show signs of hardening into a tradition, and are making their presence felt. We note an increasing compromise of ethical values, both blatantly, and, also more subtly in the cult of celebrities, orientation to financial success, and the susceptibility to seeking 'entertainment' rather than excellence.. When books like "Marketing the Church" are best-sellers, and with the proliferation of volumes dedicated to the cultivation of self-love, it is not surprising to see godly theologians like David Wells writing polemical works such as 'Losing our Virtue'. Another mark of much recent fundamentalism is a tendency to confuse 'empire-building' with the advance of God's kingdom.

2.1.7 'Neo-Evangelical' Tradition

In reaction to fundamentalism there emerged, in the nineteen-forties, led by Carl Henry, Harold Ockenga, and later Francis Schaeffer, a movement that was styled neo-evangelicalism. At its best, this was marked by intellectual and cultural renewal, and a sturdy well thought out apologetic, as well as the writing of first-rate biblical commentaries, and serious contributions to systematic theology.

English evangelicals contributed to this movement, and, later, Australians such as Leon Morris, Broughton Knox and Marcus Loane, and evangelicals from Latin America, gave a world-wide flavour to the movement. This movement has provided an on-going tradition of serious academic commitment, and an attempt to inter-act with other sections of the professing church.

However, in some places this has produced tensions, both ecclesiastically and doctrinally. In the latter field, such foundational teachings as the Omniscience of God, the Authority of Scripture, the imputed righteousness of Christ, Justification by Faith, and Eternal Punishment have been challenged. In a word, there has been serious doctrinal compromise, and surrender to the intellectual climate of post-modernity.

2.2 Traditions Embraced by the Church of England in South Africa

So much for the traditions we have inherited, and to which, although in a minuscule way due to our smallness, we have contributed. We must now ask to what extent we have embraced these traditions, not merely formally, but in actual practice. At this point, I need to remind my hearers that a minister of the gospel has to be faithful to the truth, that is, to God's revealed truth in Scripture, which is unchanging, and to his own understanding of that truth and the existential reality with which he is confronted. So, I may not speak 'smooth' things, but that which I believe will be of most value to God's Church. At the same time, any strictures I make are the result of personal observation, and because we are such a 'mixed bunch' they are not personally applicable to all, and, in fact, may in some instances apply only to a few. I can only plead that these criticisms are not made with rancour, and spring out of my concern. The danger of generalisation is always with us, and I know I am not immune!

2.2.1 "Catholic" Tradition

As we look at 'Catholic' tradition, we still stand sturdily in line with the doctrine of the Ecumenical Creeds, though the actual use of the creedal formulations differs from congregation to congregation, with the Athanasian Creed practically defunct, mostly due to our

preoccupation with haste in ‘getting through the preliminaries’. We are, in measure, an episcopal church, but with the traditional role of the bishops seriously modified, and, if truth be told, with some uncertainty and disquiet as to the exact place that bishops should have in the church. The ancient church’s hymnody is, in some churches, practically rejected, with almost no contemporary language versions of these great songs being used, with the possible exception of Bishop Timothy Dudley-Smith’s beautiful “Tell out my soul!” Snide remarks about the ‘tedium’ reflect our theological illiteracy, rather than our wit!

2.2.2 “Protestant” Tradition

Thankfully, we are still ‘Protestant’ in doctrine, at least at a formal level, but it would be helpful if we were to take a look at our methodology and liturgical practice to make sure that they reflect a deep concern for the primacy of scripture and grace.

2.2.3 “Anglican” Tradition

Our attitude to those hallmarks of classical Anglican tradition that I have highlighted is to my mind sadly ambivalent. Thirty-five years ago, CESA ministers would have regarded loyalty to the Articles and Prayer-Book *de rigueur*, even if exercising some latitude on one or two doctrinal ambiguities in the liturgy. Today the situation is very different. Although the denomination has wisely granted real liberty in liturgical practice, the modest demands still made are often flagrantly abused or ignored. While basic theological, Christological and soteriological doctrines are strongly upheld some clergy appear to believe that covenant baptism is an ‘optional’ doctrine. There are ministers who apparently regard the hundred or so references to the ordinance in the New Testament as insignificant, more or less on a level in doctrinal importance with minor details of eschatology. At present, our ordination vows, as they stand, do not appear always to reflect, in some of the details, the real doctrinal position of those who take them, and the same applies to the promises regarding liturgical practice. Obviously, in respect of liturgy accommodation can and should be made to any cultural norms not contrary to Scripture. Whatever my personal predilections, I am not opposed in principle to us resolving the liturgical problem by making practice entirely optional, provided that we maintain the Cranmerian tradition

of having a form of service that is biblical, congregational and doctrinally instructive. More on this anon.

With regard to doctrine, our denominational distinctives are clear, and unambiguous, and office-bearers have a serious obligation to give them *ex anima* assent.

2.2.4 “Evangelical” Tradition

We pride ourselves on our adherence to the evangelical tradition, and one is thankful that such is, broadly speaking, the case. However, until the recent past, the denomination has been far from the evangelicalism with a social conscience such as characterised Wilberforce, the Clapham Sect, or the Earl of Shaftesbury. Further, whatever happened to the evangelical insistence on holiness? Bishop Ryle used to say that grace that was not visible could be held to be non-existent. And what of the disciplines of the private devotional life? One hears of private prayer and Bible study being dismissed as ‘mechanical’ or even ‘unspiritual’ - actually, this is often a great ‘cop-out’ for the undisciplined. As to churchmanship, moderate or otherwise, one is not unreasonable to ask for loyalty to a church that has, under God, brought one to Christ, and/or nurtured them in Christ, and then has trained them for further ministry, often at congregational expense.. No doubt CESA, like all church organizations, is flawed. The answer is to address the weaknesses candidly and Christianly, and the denominational leadership needs to facilitate that. Looking elsewhere for a more suitable or more lucrative living is not the proper response to the situation.

2.2.5 “Fundamentalist” Tradition

2.2.5.1 Early Fundamentalism

Perhaps one of the brightest features that marks our present Christian workers is the way that they have shed most of those disfiguring features of early fundamentalism, while managing to hold on to the ‘Fundamentals’ themselves. For this, under God, the ministry of George Whitefield College is largely responsible.

2.2.5.2 Recent Fundamentalism

However, when we look at the more recent developments in fundamentalism, our church gives some cause for concern. We may have been spared the worst of the elements of cultivating admiration for sporting and other icons, but I am personally concerned at the tendency in some places to equate financial success with spiritual achievement. Such an adage as “Big money follows good ministry” can make a valid point, but it can also be a thoughtless insult to every minister working in poverty-stricken communities, and to nearly all missionaries. The Lord Jesus had no place to lay His head and was buried in a borrowed tomb. Peter and John had no silver or gold, and the apostle Paul described himself as “poor yet making many rich”. A pre-occupation with material wealth is a mark of the world, not the true people of God.

Also, in respect of evaluating our ministries, each of us needs to ask himself/herself, “How much reliance do I place on that which is generated by merely human ingenuity, and how much do I look to the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit to advance God’s kingdom? And how is this evident in my approach to my ministry?”

2.2.6 “Neo-evangelical” Tradition

Ever since I was brought into an understanding of the doctrines of grace, and particularly after I came across the writings of Francis Schaeffer I have had a passion to see the evangelical church emerging from its ‘Fundamentalist Ghetto’, and the last ten years have, in this respect, gladdened my heart. I believe that, especially among our younger Christian workers, but not confined to them, there has come a desire to make a significant, distinctively Christian contribution to our ‘New’ South Africa. It is particularly heartening that this is being sought without doctrinal compromise, although in this regard we need to remember that ‘the price of freedom is eternal vigilance’.

2.3 The Tradition we will Pass on

As we look to the future, and the tradition we will pass on to our successors, we need to face realistically the problems with which we are confronted..

2.3.1 The Problem of our History

First of all, there is the problem of our history. For a century our strategy as a church was governed by the necessity for survival. This was not conducive to growth or spiritual maturity. We were also a church, that largely in common with our peers, divided into two groups - what John de Gruchy called 'settler church' and 'mission church'. The baneful results of that division, though being addressed, are still with us, and we have far to go to reverse the damage caused.

2.3.2 The Problem of Immaturity

Immaturity in the young is by no means a matter of shame, and, given that CESA has only really emerged as at all significant in the last twenty-five years, we have all the marks of a young church. Among these, a certain immaturity is inevitable. This quality is visible in the way we tend to take on ideas from other scenes of evangelical activity somewhat indiscriminately. Over the last thirty years, I have watched us embrace the neo-Calvinism of Lloyd-Jones and Jim Packer, the evangelistic technique of James Kennedy, the expository style of Dick Lucas and the Proclamation Trust, , the 'seeker-friendly' or 'purpose-driven' emphases from America, the 'Biblical Theology' of Goldsworthy, and the most recent Matthias-Media contributions. Strangely enough, though they are in many ways quite disparate, all of them have contributed positively and significantly to our ministry. However, we are not London in the sixties or the nineties, or contemporary America or Australia. We are South Africa, with its unique twenty-first century 'rainbow nation' situation. Foreign strategies are not the total solution. If we are to hand on a viable evangelical tradition to our children, we need to proclaim the old unchanging message in a manner that takes into account, not only the enclaves of 'White' affluence, but the vibrant, yet very different world of our 'urban sprawl' including the world of shacks and grinding poverty, as well as the rural areas that are trying

to come to terms with all the contradictions of the modern and post-modern world.

2.3.3 The Problem of Fragmentation

Lastly, there is the problem of our fragmentation. This is ethnic, but also ecclesiastical.

The ethnic diversity in our church should be a strength, not a weakness, but in our history it well-nigh fatally divided the church. Obviously linguistic and cultural differences cannot be ignored, but they should not be determinative, and there must be a courageous recognition that the future leadership of the Church must be authentically African, irrespective of skin pigmentation! I am sure that this crucial issue is already being addressed.

Years ago, I was told that there was no identity problem in CESA. I believed, and still believe, that there is such a problem. It is a blessing that the problem is not whether we will be evangelical or not. Our problem is that while we are generally Anglican doctrinally, this is because we are an evangelical church, which, almost as a result of historical accident, has its roots in Anglicanism. Ecclesiastically, we are essentially a hybrid, with Episcopalian, Presbyterian and Congregational elements. This inevitably leads to tensions in the church. Liturgically, we are moving away, and in some cases have already moved away, from anything resembling a fixed liturgy. In my view, it is impossible for this mixed situation not to create a crisis of identity. We need the courage to resolve our fragmentation by more clearly defining the position and authority of bishops, by retaining our Covenantal Reformed theology, and by being honest about our true convictions regarding liturgical practice, and agreeing on parameters that the denomination's leadership, and particularly its Synod, have the intestinal fortitude to insist on.

3 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Every expression of the Body of Christ is heir to the diverse traditions of the church in history. The future in CESA will be determined by the church's response to the challenges of tradition - responses based on a proper understanding of the relationship between the inerrant inscripturated word of God, and the application of the principles of that changeless Word to our contemporary society. That is, we must live under the Word, in fellowship with the church of the past and the present, in order that we may address the world with the gospel.
