

Tradition (Protestant)

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The Christian faith lives by means of the passing on of its content. For centuries, the testimony of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ has been handed down both orally and in writing. Tradition is therefore a process of transmission (lat. tradere). In this process, Christians grapple with how to understand the passed-on content (lat. tradita, traditum). From this grappling emerged doctrines and creeds, rituals, and attitudes that likewise can be described as tradition. Even though the emergence of faith is not subject to human control, the transmission of the content of faith is a necessary medium through which faith can emerge. The question of tradition is therefore a foundational topic for theology. Yet it is one that has often only been dealt with marginally within Protestant dogmatics, primarily in the context of interdenominational controversies surrounding the question of the sources of theology and salvation. Protestant theology always determines the exact meaning of tradition in relation to the bible.

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Editorial Note

Links to other media and further information regarding this topic can be found in the German version of this article.

1. Demarcating tradition: the confessional debate concerning the normativity of scripture and tradition in the Reformation era

A differentiation between theological doctrines derived from the biblical testimony or from the oral tradition only became established in the course of the confessional disputes in the 16th century. What dominated prior to this was

an understanding of “Catholic truths” that regarded the authority of the Church as decisive and that did not distinguish between whether Christian truths came from the bible or from other sources.^[1] Alongside sacred scripture, the apostolic tradition was regarded as an authentic and unaltered transmission from the apostolic era and, accordingly, was accepted as a legitimate guarantor of truths pertaining to salvation. The Church’s teachings based on this apostolic tradition thereby could be framed as necessary for salvation. During the Reformation, Martin Luther ^{GND} criticized those teachings of the Roman Catholic Church that had no basis in biblical testimony but which the church nonetheless presented as necessary for salvation. Drawing from Mk 7:8 and Col 2:8, he designated such teachings “human traditions” (*traditiones hominum*) and, as such, characterized them as apostasy.^[2] Luther granted no normative function to tradition, since, in his estimation, only the biblical testimony could be the source of truths necessary for salvation. Nevertheless, Luther did value the tradition of the early church. This suggests that he was not proposing a total break from tradition but more so a correction of certain abuses. Luther therefore does not reject tradition as such but only its normative function for the truths of faith. According to the reformers, scripture alone (*Sola Scriptura*) is normative in this regard. Alongside its normative function, it also contains in the doctrine of justification – which was understood as a substantive criterion for ecclesiastical orders – a kind of “principle of tradition” (*Traditionsprinzip*). Formally, however, only scripture possesses normative authority.^[3]

In response to the reformer’s emphasis on scripture, the Roman Catholic Church redefined the relationship between scripture and tradition at the Council of Trent in 1546: the Gospel and the truths necessary for salvation were contained in “written books and unwritten traditions” (*in libris scriptis et sine scripto traditionibus*), both of which, “received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the Apostles themselves, the Holy Spirit dictating, have come down even to us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand.”^[4] This so-called two-source theory of the Gospel was viewed as a devaluation of sacred scripture, since the latter was now seen as requiring supplementation from oral tradition.^[5]

In response to the high esteem for oral tradition in the Roman Catholic Church and its correlate devaluation of scripture, the reformers and early Protestant theologians defended the scriptural principle (*Schriftprinzip*) by defining the biblical testimony as the Word of God.^[6] As a result, Protestant theology tended not to pay much attention to the notion of tradition. In fact, the focus on scripture within protestant theology can only cast a negative light on the concept of tradition. However, the scriptural principle itself can be seen as part of the Protestant tradition where it functions as the norm for every engagement with traditions.

2. From the normativity of faith to the actualization of the past: on the development of the concept of tradition

While the term tradition was initially a religious and foreign term in the 16th century, the confessional disputes eventually led to its adoption into the German language. Instead of doctrines or statutes, the term now referred to the oral and written accounts (narratives, reports) of historical events.^[7] It was thereby linked to history and came to function as a foundational methodological concept for the study of history. Traditions were now viewed as visual, oral, and written documentation of memorable events. The debate concerning true and false traditions, which characterized the confessional disputes of the Reformation period, receded into the background. The focus turned instead to how traditions that had passed away could be appropriated and made *alive* once again.

The radical criticism of authority that marked the Enlightenment also weakened the assumed authority of traditions: no longer accepted as sources of handed-down truths, traditions were now to be scrutinized by autonomous reason. It was precisely through this critique of tradition that the power and significance of traditions in history became clearer.^[8] As a result of the development of historical thinking and the central place given to reason in the Enlightenment, the historicity and thus tradition-bound nature of both scripture and all other authoritative Christian teachings were recognized and criticized. Historical biblical research uncovered the contexts of tradition that plunged the ontology of scripture into a crisis: the mutability and internal contradictions of the traditions preserved in the Bible

fundamentally called into question the identification of the bible as the Word of God. Tradition now meant historicity as well as changeability, and it indicated the relativity of history. Both Protestant and Roman Catholic theology now had to justify their truth claims anew.

3. The tradition(s) of the Christian transmission process: “Tradition” in 20th century ecumenical debates

In the 20th century, the Ecumenical Commission on Faith and Order (cf. art. Ecumenism) addressed the controversial relationship between scripture and tradition. It reflected on the relationship of the different denominational traditions to the one Christian process of tradition and their common origin in the revelation of God. Even though Protestant theology has only rarely taken the results^[9] of the final report into consideration, they nevertheless represent an ecumenical breakthrough.^[10] The Commission differentiated terminologically between various levels of tradition, thereby capturing in all its complexity the relationship between scripture, the process of transmission, and traditions: *TRADITION* refers to the Gospel, *tradition* (singular) to the process of tradition, and *traditions* (plural) to both the various forms of expressions within the tradition and the confessional traditions. Within these different levels of tradition, scripture plays a normative role as testimony to revelation and as a “treasure of the Word of God.”^[11] The report calls on the churches to study the bible together as a way to examine their own traditions and to seek the common TRADITION.

4. A protestant perspective on tradition

Based upon the conceptual distinctions noted above, it is possible to outline a Protestant understanding of tradition:
^[12] The one Christian transmission history (*Überlieferungsgeschichte*) unfolds into various denominational traditions, each of whose understanding of the one Christian tradition develops its own specific accent. What is particular to the Protestant tradition is that its understanding of tradition is determined by its critical engagement with scripture: defining the biblical testimony (cf. art. Witness) as the sole normative source of the Gospel, the scriptural principle guides all evaluation and use of tradition. In relation to the biblical witness, a distinction must be made between traditions that emerge from pre-Easter contexts of transmission from those that emerge from post-Easter contexts. While the *pre-Easter* traditions serve to illuminate what God has revealed through the life and fate of Jesus, the *post-Easter* traditions arise from this revelation and its interpretations. The post-Easter traditions can in turn be divided into *canonical* and *non- or post-canonical* traditions. Through their canonization, the biblical writings are recognized as foundational for the Christian tradition and can be distinguished from non-canonical writings (cf. art. Canon). Accordingly, the non- or post-canonical formation of traditions are to be characterized in terms of the reception and effective history (*Rezeptions- und Wirkungsgeschichte*) of the biblical canon.

Traditions are historically conditioned and shaped by their context of origin. In the process of their appropriation, they are understood anew and in ways that differ from how they were understood in that original context. The processes of tradition are therefore marked by varying degrees of continuity and discontinuity. By adopting production-aesthetic and reception-aesthetic perspectives (*produktionsästhetische und rezeptionsästhetische Perspektiven*) on tradition, it is also possible to identify, on the one hand, the conditions under which traditions come into being and how they change, and, on the other hand, the intellectual and emotional effects of traditions on the recipients. In order to describe the complexity of the processes of the Christian tradition, it is necessary to possess an understanding of tradition that can differentiate between its normative and procedural dimensions. This enables tradition to remain a dynamic occurrence and prevents it from transforming into traditionalism (*Traditionalismus*).

Recommended Literature

Berry, John Anthony/Coman, Viorel (Eds.), *Living Tradition. Continuity and Change as Challenges to Churches and Theologies*. Proceedings of the 21st Academic Consultation of the Societas Oecumenica (ÖR.B 140), Leipzig 2024.

Rodger, P. C./Vischer, Lukas (Ed.), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order*. Montreal 1963 (Faith and Order Paper 42), London 1964, 50-61.

Citations

- ¹ Cf. Kirchner, Hubert, *Wort Gottes, Schrift und Tradition* (Ökumenische Studienhefte 9, Bensheimer Hefte 89), Göttingen 1998, 25.
- ² Cf. Luther, Martin, *Von Menschenlehre zu meiden* (1522), WA 10/II, 72–68. See also Sperl, Adolf, *Zur Geschichte des Begriffes 'Tradition' in der evangelischen Theologie*, in: Andersen, Wilhelm (Ed.), *Das Wort Gottes in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. Theologische Aufsätze von Mitarbeitern an der Augustana-Hochschule in Neuendettelsau, herausgegeben anlässlich des 10. Jahrestages ihres Bestehens am 10. Dezember 1957, München 1957, 147–159, 149.
- ³ Cf. Hauschild, Wolf-Dieter, *Die Bewertung der Tradition in der lutherischen Reformation*, in: Pannenberg, Wolfhart/Schneider, Theodor (Eds.), *Verbindliches Zeugnis. I. Kanon – Schrift – Tradition*, Freiburg i. Br./Göttingen 1992, 195–231, 213f.
- ⁴ DH 1501 [Kompodium der Glaubensbekenntnisse und kirchlichen Lehrentscheidungen (= Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum), verbessert, erweitert, ins Deutsche übertragen und unter Mitarbeit von Helmut Hoping hrsg. von Peter Hünemann, Freiburg i. Br. ⁴⁵2017].
- ⁵ Cf. Kirchner, *Wort Gottes*, 28–32.
- ⁶ Cf. Hägglund, Bengt, *Die Heilige Schrift und ihre Deutung in der Theologie Johann Gerhards. Eine Untersuchung über das altlutherische Schriftverständnis*, Lund 1951, 64–81.136–147.
- ⁷ On this history, see Grimm, Jacob/Grimm, Wilhelm, *Art. Tradition*, in: Grimm, Jacob/Grimm, Wilhelm (Eds.), *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Bd. 11, I. Abteilung 1. Teil T – Treftig, Leipzig 1935, Sp. 1022–1025; Sperl, *Geschichte*, 153–155.
- ⁸ Cf. Ebeling, Gerhard, *“Sola scriptura” und das Problem der Tradition*, in: Ebeling, Gerhard (Ed.), *Wort Gottes und Tradition*, Göttingen 1964, 91–143, 95.
- ⁹ Cf. Rodger, P. C./Vischer, Lukas (Ed.), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order*. Montreal 1963 (Faith and Order Paper 42), London 1964, 50–61.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Lauster, Jörg, *Prinzip und Methode. Die Transformation des protestantischen Schriftprinzips durch die historische Kritik von Schleiermacher bis zur Gegenwart* (HUTh 46), Tübingen 2004, 347–354.360f.
- ¹¹ Rodger/Lukas, *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order*, 51.
- ¹² See also Maikranz, Elisabeth, *Tradition und Schrift. Eine Verhältnisbestimmung bei Wolfhart Pannenberg und Walter Kasper* (DoMo 43), Tübingen 2023, 483–493.

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