

WHAT EVANGELICALS AND LIBERALS CAN LEARN FROM THE CHURCH FATHERS

CHRISTOPHER A. HALL*

Bart Ehrman, the James A. Gray Professor and chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has recently published an interesting, provocative book titled *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*.¹ Ehrman's title is thought-provoking. There are clearly, in Ehrman's thinking, "Christianities" that have been lost as what we know as "orthodox" Christianity emerged as the dominant group and purposely suppressed other "Christian" interpretations of the gospel.

Ehrman describes these diverse "Christianities" as illustrative of an amazing, lively diversity in the earliest centuries of the Church's history. In Ehrman's words, "What could be more diverse than this variegated phenomenon, Christianity in the modern world? In fact, there may be an answer: Christianity in the ancient world. As historians have come to realize, during the first three Christian centuries, the practices and beliefs found among people who called themselves Christians were so varied that the differences between Roman Catholics, Primitive Baptists, and Seventh-Day Adventists pale by comparison."²

Despite the diversity found in the ancient Christian world, Ehrman acknowledges that "virtually all forms of modern Christianity, whether they acknowledge it or not, go back to one form of Christianity that emerged as victorious from the conflicts of the second and third centuries."³ What we know as orthodox Christianity today, with its distinct affirmations concerning the Trinity, Christ's incarnation, resurrection, and ascension, Christ's body, the Church, and so on, are viewed by Ehrman as the tenets of a community that defeated its theological and ecclesial opponents through its dominance, strength, and willingness to shape the historical record into its own image. Other perspectives, all of whom orthodox Christians would describe as in some way heterodox, either were "reformed or stamped out, by the dominant orthodox group."⁴

* Christopher A. Hall is professor of biblical and theological studies at Eastern University, 1300 Eagle Road, St. Davids, PA 19087-3696. This paper was originally presented as a plenary address at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Valley Forge, PA on November 16, 2005.

¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

² *Ibid.* 1.

³ *Ibid.* 4.

⁴ *Ibid.* 1.

Ehrman repeatedly employs the language of triumph, dominance, and marginalization to portray the success of orthodoxy in the early Church. This one form of Christianity decided what was the “correct” Christian perspective; it decided who could exercise authority over Christian belief and practice; and it determined what forms of Christianity would be marginalized, set aside, destroyed. It also decided which books to canonize into Scripture and which books to set aside as “heretical,” teaching false ideas.

And then, as a *coup de grace*, this victorious party rewrote the history of the controversy, making it appear that there had not been much of a conflict at all, claiming that its own views had always been those of the majority of Christians at all times, back to the time of Jesus and his apostles, that its perspective, in effect, had always been “orthodox” (i.e. the “right belief”) and that its opponents in the conflict, with their other scriptural texts, had always represented small splinter groups invested in deceiving people into “heresy.”⁵

At the cost of a coerced and manipulated unity, the diversity of the ancient Christian world evaporates, with an accompanying catalog of losses. Ehrman asks, what if “some other form of Christianity” had triumphed? The thought and practices of the Christian world would have been entirely different.

. . . the familiar doctrines of Christianity might never have become the “standard” belief of millions of people, including the belief that there is only one God, that he is the creator, that Christ his son is both human and divine. The doctrine of the Trinity might never have developed. The creeds still spoken in churches today might never have been devised. The New Testament as a collection of sacred books might never have come into being. Or it might have come into being with an entirely different set of books, including, for example, the Gospel of Thomas instead of the Gospel of Matthew, or the Epistle of Barnabas instead of the Epistle of James, or the Apocalypse of Peter instead of the Apocalypse of John.⁶

I. LISTENING TO IRENAEUS

In roughly the first half of my address, I want to allow a Church father to respond to at least some of the issues, individuals, and groups Ehrman believes should be classified as possible “Christianities.”⁷ Irenaeus (ca. AD 130–200), bishop of Lyons in the late second century AD and a principal opponent of the Gnostic “Christianities” advocated by Gnostic teachers such as Marcion, Basilides, Carpocrates, Cerinthus, and Valentinus, was convinced that the Gnostic world view, one with its distinct set of doctrines and practices, could not possibly be considered Christian. Irenaeus is worth listening to, both because he was a clear, cogent thinker and writer, and because he was familiar with the teaching of early orthodox Christian leaders such as Poly-

⁵ Ibid. 4.

⁶ Ibid. 6.

⁷ In this section of my address I am freely drawing on material from chapters 9–10 in my book *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002).

carp, who in turn were familiar with even earlier Christian leaders and teaching. Does Irenaeus's testimony, often given in the heat of debate, render plausible or implausible Professor Ehrman's position that the defeat of Gnostic teaching within the early Church was largely a matter of one group dominating and finally marginalizing another group?

First, we must address the question of authority. Irenaeus, writing in the latter half of the second century, strongly asserted the authority of the Scripture and the Church against his Gnostic opponents. Gnostic teachers claimed to possess divine authority for their particular doctrines and often taught they had received secret revelation in either written or oral form, handed down to them by the apostles. "They tell us, however," Irenaeus writes, "that this knowledge has not been openly divulged, because all are not capable of receiving it, but has been mystically revealed by the Savior through means of parables to those qualified for understanding it."⁸

While some Gnostics claimed to supplement apostolic teaching with their supposedly secret revelation, Irenaeus insists that there is no need to go beyond the apostles in a search for further revelation. Why? The apostles, personally chosen by Jesus to be his unique representatives and interpreters, possessed "perfect knowledge. . . . For, after our Lord rose from the dead, the apostles were invested with power from on high when the Holy Spirit came down upon them, were filled from all His gifts, and had perfect knowledge."⁹ Apostolic revelation and interpretation, then, were intimately linked to the Holy Spirit and divinely inspired in a manner that set apostolic testimony apart as the word of God.

The question of authority is intimately linked to the question of interpretation. Gnostic leaders such as Marcion were guilty, Irenaeus argues, of an ideological hermeneutic that encouraged them to accept those aspects of apostolic revelation that fit their theology and to reject those features that would cast suspicion on their theological formulations. Marcion, for instance, drove a wedge between the God revealed in the OT and the God revealed in Christ, and would pit apostolic authorities such as Luke and Paul against one another when such apostolic infighting served Marcion's purposes. Such a hermeneutical strategy was a dead end, Irenaeus believes, because "Luke was inseparable from Paul, and his fellow-laborer in the Gospel."¹⁰

When Gnostic teachers like Marcion embraced only those parts of Luke's Gospel that supported their theological formulations, they betrayed their ideological prejudices. Such picking and choosing just will not do, Irenaeus writes. "It follows then . . . that these men either receive the rest of [Luke's] narrative, or else reject these parts also. For no persons of common sense can permit them to receive some things recounted by Luke as being true, and to set others aside, as if he had not known the truth."¹¹

⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.3.1, ANF 1.319.

⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1, cited in *The Church Fathers on the Bible* (ed. Frank Sadowski; New York: Alba House, 1983) 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 3.14.1, cited in Sadowski, *The Church Fathers on the Bible* 33–34.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 3.14.3, cited in Sadowski, *The Church Fathers on the Bible* 36–37.

What was Marcion's fundamental problem? He was reading the Scriptures in a sloppy, negligent, inattentive fashion. Marcion's insistence that the OT Scriptures were inferior to his heavily edited apostolic texts evidenced a failure on Marcion's part to grasp the basic story line of God's redemptive work in history. Anyone, Irenaeus insists, who reads "the Scriptures with attention . . . will find in them an account of Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling." That is, it is foolish to eliminate the first chapters of a story that provide key plot lines for the final chapters. Foreshadowings of Christ are peppered throughout the OT literature. Christ is a treasure "hid in the Scriptures . . . since He was pointed out by means of types and parables." Granted, the OT references to Christ are not always simple to discern, but this difficulty is to be expected, "for every prophecy, before its fulfillment, is to people full of enigmas and ambiguities. But when the time has arrived, and the prediction has come to pass, then the prophecies have a clear and certain exposition."¹²

The focus of wise and devout study is not an ambiguous mystery revealed only to a select few. The Gnostic tendency to find hidden, esoteric meanings in Jesus' parables, for instance, violates a devout, sound hermeneutic. It leads to a hermeneutical free-for-all in which each individual touts the mysteries he or she alone has discovered. "For in this way," Irenaeus comments, "no one will possess the rule of truth; but in accordance with the number of persons who explain the parables will be found the various systems of truth, in mutual opposition to each other, and setting forth antagonistic doctrines."¹³

Wise Christians, Irenaeus advises, will always center their attention upon the Scripture but will rebuke the fallen tendency to focus on esoteric passages at the expense of the Scripture's plain teaching on a vast array of issues, including creation and the nature of God. Here, indeed, were two key areas where Gnostic teachers had wandered far from the truth, precisely because of the skewed belief that the mysterious should be the grid by which to interpret the clear and unambiguous, rather than vice versa.

Allow what is clear in the Scripture to shed light on what is foggy, Irenaeus coaches. If one does so, soon the melodies and harmonies of Scripture will reach the reader's ears. Despite the diversity of Scripture, "there shall be heard one harmonious melody in us, praising in hymns that God who created all things."

It is important to observe at this juncture that Irenaeus refuses to separate the authority of the Scripture and the task of biblical interpretation from the community of the Church itself. According to Irenaeus, the Gnostics err, not only because they fail to read the Bible well, but because they refuse to join "themselves to the Church." Instead, their highly individualistic interpretations of the Bible lead to doctrinal confusion and ethical disaster. They "defraud themselves of life through their perverse opinions and infamous behavior."¹⁴

¹² Ibid. 4.26.1, cited in Sadowski, *The Church Fathers on the Bible* 38.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. 3.24.1, ANF 1.458.

The Gnostics remain confused in both their doctrine of God and in their understanding of theology, because they ignore “the beginning, the middle, and the end,” that is, the testimony of the OT Scriptures, the witness of Christ and his apostles, and the continuing guidance of Christ’s Church in Irenaeus’s own day. Irenaeus believes that in his response to Gnosticism he is simply preserving the gospel he and all Christians have received from previous generations of Christians. Through the preserving ministry of the Holy Spirit, the “entire dispensation of God” has been passed on faithfully over the years. As Irenaeus explains, “this gift of God has been entrusted to the Church, as breath was to the first created man, for this purpose, that all the members receiving it may be vivified; and the [means of] communion with Christ has been distributed throughout it, that is, the Holy Spirit . . . the means of confirming our faith, and the ladder of ascent to God.”¹⁵

Because the Gnostics deserted the Church in their quest for “knowledge,” Irenaeus states that they are bereft of the Spirit and the life of Christ. Christ, the Spirit, and Christ’s body on earth, the Church, are inseparable: “For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church. . . .”¹⁶

It is within the Church that the teaching of the apostles has been faithfully passed on and preserved, rather than within the Gnostic communities. How so? Apostolic teaching has been “preserved by means of the successions of presbyters in the Churches.”¹⁷ Irenaeus believes that anyone of good faith can observe the public record: “It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times.”¹⁸ If the apostles passed on secrets to a chosen few, as the Gnostic teachers claimed, would they not have communicated these secrets to those chosen by the Church to succeed the apostles as leaders of Christ’s body? Furthermore, would not the apostles have passed on this secret information to those they had publicly recognized as leaders within the Church, leaders who bore the responsibility for faithfully preserving the teaching of the apostles? Irenaeus adds, “For [the apostles] desired that these men should be very perfect and blameless in all things, [men] they were leaving behind as their successors, delivering up their own place of government to these men.”¹⁹

Irenaeus is deeply concerned to demonstrate the unbroken connection between the apostles and the bishops or presbyters of the Church, precisely because Gnostic teachers were denying the connection. Apostolic truth was grounded on the apostles’ teaching and had been handed down publicly by

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. 3.2.2, ANF 1.415.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid. 3.3.1, ANF 1.415.

¹⁹ Ibid.

them in their writings to specific Christian leaders whose responsibility it was to pass on and preserve that same truth faithfully. This was not something done in a corner or secretly. Thus, if leaders arise claiming to be teaching in the name of Christ and Christ's Church, their teaching must be tested by the standard of apostolic truth preserved in the Church. Why? Because the apostles passed on the truth to the Church and expected the Church to preserve and preach it. New teachings that did not fit the apostolic pattern could not be welcomed. To use an analogy, "the apostles, like a rich man [depositing his money] in a bank, lodged in [the Church's] hands most copiously all things pertaining to the truth: so that every person . . . can draw from her the water of life."²⁰

The Church, in Irenaeus's thinking, is an inherently conservative institution. For Irenaeus, it is not the job of the Church to innovate or to create new doctrines out of whole cloth. Whatever the Church chooses to say must find its root in apostolic sources. If the source of a bishop's teaching, for example, cannot be traced to apostolic teaching, that bishop's instruction must remain suspect. When disputes over teaching and doctrine arise, Irenaeus argues that they must be adjudicated by turning to the "most ancient Churches with which the apostles held constant intercourse, and learn from them what is certain and clear in response to the present question."²¹ Teachers within the Church must never place themselves above apostolic teaching. They are not free to undercut the apostolic tradition through appeals to further revelation, however secret, mysterious, or elevated such revelation might appear to be.

Irenaeus does warn of the possibility of a presbyter of the church falling into error. There are those who "are believed to be presbyters by many" but whose behavior or teaching undercuts their claim to the position. The height of ecclesiastical disaster is the presbyter who fails in both his teaching and behavior. "Keep aloof from all such persons," Irenaeus exhorts, and "adhere to those who, as I have already observed . . . hold the doctrine of the apostles, and who, together with the order of the priesthood, display sound speech and blameless conduct for the confirmation and correction of others."²² Thus, the doctrine of the apostles remains the fundamental rule of life for faith and doctrine for all members of the Church, from its highest leadership on down.

Heretics such as the Gnostics, then, err seriously on a variety of issues. First, they have forgotten that they, like all Christians, are called to be students of the apostles, rather than their teachers. All the key Gnostic teachers "are of much later date than the bishops to whom the apostles committed the Churches." Second, because the Gnostics are faulty listeners, refusing to submit to apostolic doctrine as taught in the Scriptures and preserved by the Church, Gnostic doctrine itself is confused and "scattered here and there without agreement or connection."²³

²⁰ Ibid. 3.4.1, ANF 1.416.

²¹ Ibid. 3.4.1, ANF 1.417.

²² Ibid. 4.26.3-4, ANF 1.497.

²³ Ibid. 5.20.1, ANF 1.548.

Third, the mark of heretical teachers is that they believe only they have discovered the truth. Only they “have hit something more beyond the truth.” The problem, Irenaeus writes, is that when people each discover their own truth for themselves, truth itself ends up scattered and inharmonious. The blind end up leading the blind, and they “deservedly fall into the ditch of ignorance lying in their path, ever seeking and never finding out the truth.” What is the remedy for this willful blindness? Run “to the Church . . . be brought up in her bosom, and be nourished with the Lord’s Scriptures.” Assume a humble stance before apostolic doctrine. Admit the limitations of human understanding. Do not be like the Gnostics, who have “formed opinions on what is beyond the limits of understanding,” who have “set their own impious minds above the God who made them.”²⁴

We must leave Irenaeus, at least for the time being. Irenaeus’s arguments against his Gnostic opponents demonstrate clearly, I think, that the emergence of an orthodox consensus within the early Church involved a complex testing of both ideas and practices. Different groups did claim the title “Christian.” And we would be naïve to think that the early Church was immune to the temptations power and prestige occasionally offered. Yet we would be strikingly myopic if we reduced the Church’s thoughtful and lively response to Gnosticism to an attempt to dominate, marginalize, and deceitfully rewrite history. Gnostic documents, methods of interpretation, and theological models were rejected by the orthodox Christian community. This rejection, however, was firmly based on the conviction that the content of apostolic tradition was identifiable, as was the pattern of authority instituted by Christ himself. On both counts, Gnostic teaching and practice failed to match the pattern of apostolic truth.

II. LISTENING TO THE CHURCH FATHERS

I turn now to the second aspect of the question contained in the title of this address: What might the Church fathers teach conservative evangelicals? More particularly, how might evangelicals incorporate patristic insights concerning authority and tradition, while simultaneously preserving the strengths of the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*?

I begin by referring to a recent letter of Roger Olson to the editors of *Christianity Today*.²⁵ In this letter Professor Olson expressed frustration with a recent *CT* article titled “Tangling with Wolves.” Chris Armstrong, the author of the article, had argued that “[h]eresies are worth fighting against, through the same kinds of mechanisms that the church has always used.” Professor Olson responded that Armstrong’s article “raises more questions than it answers.” For instance, what are the “mechanisms” that Armstrong appears to refer to so confidently? Further, exactly which church is Armstrong “talking about”?

²⁴ Ibid. 5.20.2, ANF 1.548.

²⁵ Roger Olson, “Readers Write” section, *Christianity Today* 47/10 (October 2003) 14.

Olson, an evangelical theologian who represents well a free-church perspective, has experienced first-hand the tendency in evangelical circles to harass, at times in a historically and theologically shortsighted manner, “basically orthodox teachers and ministers with heresy charges and trials over relatively minor differences of interpretation.”²⁶ Identifying the heart of the faith, non-negotiable matters of faith and practice, has not been easy for evangelicals, as Olson’s letter indicates.

I want to suggest that the Church’s tradition, the tradition articulated and defended by Church fathers such as Irenaeus in the second century and Athanasius in the fourth, can aid evangelical theologians in overcoming theological and historical short-sightedness, in encouraging free and open theological exploration, in nourishing the dialogical virtues necessary for fruitful, civil, and secure theological discourse, and in identifying heresies—serious exegetical and theological mutations—when they occur.

I want to address three specific issues concerning evangelical theology and the tradition of the Church, issues upon which the Church fathers reflected deeply.

1. *The content of tradition.* The Fathers clearly believed it was possible to identify the content of the Church’s tradition, for tradition itself was considered to be the faithful preservation and passing on of the gospel from generation to generation of believers, as we have already seen in Irenaeus’s response to his Gnostic opponents. Inherent in the concept of tradition in the earliest years of the Church’s history and in the Church’s healthiest moments today is the confidence that the gospel of God’s saving act in Christ can be appropriated, understood, and communicated clearly, faithfully, and correctly across the years. We have to include in tradition more than the apostolic canonical documents. We must also include the cluster of practices and beliefs contained in the Church’s rule of faith (*regula fidei*). Perhaps picture the Church’s tradition as a symphony made up of different, complementary movements, with the Bible providing the central thematic element. As William Abraham puts it,

We might sum up by thinking of the varied canonical traditions as different elements in the production of a grand symphony. The music which results is the music of salvation which naturally transposes itself into hymns of praise. Some of the canonical traditions, like the water, oil, bread, and wine of the sacraments, represent various instruments in the orchestra of the Church. Some, like Fathers and bishops, represent various players. Some, like liturgical material, represent the scores, which are best followed according to the programme notes which accompany them. Everyone involved in the orchestra must approach his or her role in a spirit of humility and dependence, of joy and praise. Most important of all, everyone must heed and be open to the leading of the great conductor, the Holy Spirit, who, through the use of the canonical traditions of the Church, creates within the participants the melody of Christ the Saviour,

²⁶ *Ibid.*

a music which leads ineluctably into the unfathomable, unspeakable mystery of the living God.²⁷

These diverse elements together make up the tradition of the Church, and we will want to attend to the whole as we proceed to investigate other matters.

2. *The authority of tradition.* The importance of authority structures outside the canon of Scripture, yet supporting and subservient to that same canon, became increasingly clear as various groups such as the Gnostics proposed ideas and practices that threatened the heart of the gospel. Indeed, many of our greatest heretics were committed Bible thumpers. Irenaeus's Gnostic opponents, for example, were more than willing to interpret canonical texts, but their interpretations effectively scrambled the gospel message, making it almost unrecognizable.

As we have seen, Irenaeus was convinced the Gnostics “disregard the order and connection of the Scriptures, destroying the truth” (1.8.1).²⁸ Imagine, Daniel Williams comments, “a beautiful mosaic of a king studded with jewels (i.e. the Bible) which is then perversely dismembered and rearranged to look like a dog or fox (Gnostic interpretations).”²⁹ Irenaeus believed the only way to insure that the Church discerned such distortions in biblical interpretation was by broadening the Church's authoritative interpretive grid. In Williams's words, “Irenaeus concludes that one cannot proceed with proofs from Scripture without resorting to a reference outside of it.”³⁰

Athanasius, for instance, turned to the worship of the Church—part of the rule of faith—as he debated with his Arian opponents concerning the Bible's teaching regarding the deity of Christ. Athanasius contended the Arian interpretation of Scripture failed to integrate plausibly with Arian practices in worship. How could Arian Christians worship Christ, an act that was “indeed blasphemous, if Christ is a creature, however elevated he may be. Yet Christ must be worshiped,” Athanasius insisted, as the Arians themselves acknowledged. Thus, the Church's worship and liturgy provided an indispensable lens for discerning the cracks in the Arian interpretation of Scripture, the same interpretation the Arians were relying on for their theological model.³¹

Evangelical theologians might well find Irenaeus's advice for adjudicating theological disagreements or conflicts helpful. Irenaeus's proposal is that we think in terms of a “three legged stool of authority: Scripture, Tradition, and the church.” All three authorities working congruently serve to protect the Church (and its theologians) from error. Williams comments, “There was

²⁷ William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 55.

²⁸ Cited in Daniel H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition & Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 88.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Cf. Hall, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* 35–42.

an inherent complementarity to the three parts, which was meant to secure the place of Christian truth and offer to each believer the means of locating this truth in space and time.”³²

If the image of a three-legged stool seems faulty, as it appears to give equal authority to the Bible, tradition, and the teaching authority of the Church, a constitutional analogy may prove more helpful. Indeed, in a recent issue of *Christianity Today* Roger Olson presents just such an illustration. Olson writes:

An analogy is the United States Constitution and the history of landmark Supreme Court decisions that serve as precedents for later decisions. Judges and lawyers must know the precedents, but the Constitution is the supreme authority. Landmark decisions of earlier courts can be overturned if they are judged to be inconsistent with the Constitution. No competent judge, however, simply tosses out the history of court decisions. They serve as secondary authorities, guides to interpretation. So it is with the Bible and the Great Tradition. Evangelicals should study the tradition, for we are not the first to seek answers to difficult questions and problems in theology. However, we must not elevate the tradition to inviolable, authoritative status.

Thus, we have a genuinely authoritative tradition, but one that can be overturned if necessary. But if the tradition can in certain circumstances be overturned, then we must ask, how are we to judge when those conditions obtain? This question brings us to our third issue: the issue of authenticity.

3. *The authenticity of developments within tradition.* The crucial question for evaluating the authenticity of a development, it seems to me, is whether any development is a faithful expression of the truth found in Scripture. This truth is the apostolic teaching that the canonical Scriptures normatively embody as uniquely inspired texts. Picture this apostolic teaching as the genetic code or DNA that governs the development of the biblical message. This DNA needs to be faithfully replicated throughout Church history to govern the ongoing proposal and development of theological models. But as the DNA replicates faithfully, the faithful theological results provide a new window into the original structure of the DNA. This is the reason that our interpretation of the Bible is so vastly aided by the Church’s rule of faith as a secondary, supportive authority. Further, every faithful development will add to our understanding of the original DNA. Thus, we can have a post-biblical theological model such as the Trinity required by the Church as orthodox, though we never run across the word “Trinity” in the Bible. How so? The genetic code found in the Scripture had already replicated in the rule of faith, and therefore the DNA in the rule of faith could serve as a reliable guide to the original DNA of the Bible. The teaching and practices of the Church guided it in recognizing the faithfulness of the Trinitarian model to the original gospel message.

³² Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition* 90.

By contrast, Arianism or any other heresy represented a theological model that the Church perceived, on the basis of the rule of faith, to contain defective or mutant DNA. Orthodox theological models are like oak trees that have sprouted from acorns. The mature tree is a natural, healthy development of the biological blueprint contained within the acorn. Heretical models, on the other hand, resemble weeds that have erupted in a field where one expected lush grass. The DNA even in a faulty model will often resemble the original enough to warrant careful testing by the Church to determine the model's authenticity.

Now, note well: If a model is finally gauged to be heretical, it is because the Church has communally determined that the proposal in question distorts the truth, that it contains mutated DNA rather a faithful representation of the original. Apart from this communal determination, any Christian at any time could challenge any doctrine on the basis of an idiosyncratic interpretation of Scripture. And if we can correct the Church on any point, then we can correct the Church on every point.

It is precisely at this juncture that we must acknowledge the hairline fractures present in the Protestant understanding of the relationship between Scripture and tradition as illustrated by Roger Olson's constitutional analogy. Olson likens the Bible to the Constitution, tradition to constitutional precedents, and the Church's ongoing confirmation and evaluation of tradition to a judge who reviews, and might correct, previous interpretations of the Constitution. A competent judge will not ignore judicial precedents, Olson believes, but may overturn them if necessary. Yet who decides whether a judge is competent? Who, indeed, but other judges? The judicial community determines a particular judge's competence. A particular judge's evaluation of precedence must be sustained by the wider judicial community.

What if one encounters a renegade judge more than willing to set aside judicial precedent—and willing also to excoriate other judges who are willing to abide by judicial precedent? Nothing could prevent such a judge from undermining the entire judicial system on the basis of that judge's widely eccentric reading of the Constitution. For the only authority recognized by such a judge is the Constitution of which he or she is the sole interpreter!

Now, consider the application to the Church. We all agree that Protestants, who are fearful of the errors of an authoritative magisterium, still ought to take tradition seriously, a point upon which the Church fathers would insist. We might say that any competent Protestant theologian will do so. But what about the theologian who judges himself competent precisely in his rejection of the tradition? By what appeal could one ever show him that his peculiar interpretation is misguided? He is his only guide! But he himself would argue that it is the Scripture that is guiding him. And on the basis of the Protestant principle alone, he appears to be correct.

So, who or what in the Church possesses the competence to judge the validity of biblical interpretation and proposed developments in theological construction? Each believer? The believer's conscience? The one who judges by his own conscience ought, in my view, to be grounded in both Scripture

and the history of the Church's interpretation of Scripture, in order to be "competent." But suppose he disagrees with me. We end up necessarily branding one another as heretics, solely because we have nothing but our Bible to adjudicate between us.

This dilemma is at the root of the evangelical struggle to identify genuine heresy and to encourage fruitful theological explorations. Interestingly enough, Professor Olson's model seems to exacerbate the very problems that he rightly fears in resurgent fundamentalism! Positively, the fundamentalist is deeply committed to the Scripture. Unfortunately, the fundamentalist's commitment to the Bible is divorced from the trustworthy safeguards of an authoritative Church tradition. Every fundamentalist judges himself to be competent to overturn as much historical precedent as necessary to maintain his reading of Scripture. The unhappy result is the rising tendency within the evangelical community to view each other with increasing suspicion and hostility, often on the basis of a reading of the Bible that is itself deeply idiosyncratic.

The continuing debate over open theism illustrates the difficulties evangelicals encounter when attempting to discern between orthodox and heterodox theological models. As John Sanders debated with me over the issue of divine providence, he was right to point out the lack of clarity among evangelical theologians regarding the Church's tradition and its role in biblical interpretation and theology. Many of Sanders's debating partners—Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem come to mind—were themselves quite willing to set aside aspects of the tradition when they felt modifications were called for.

Sanders writes:

Many of the most vociferous evangelical critics of open theism claim they are defending "the traditional view of God." Yet, at the same time, they make significant modifications to the traditional view! . . . Bruce Ware revises the traditional doctrine of immutability and says that God enters into reciprocal relations with us (yet, he also holds that God exercises meticulous control over all we do). Wayne Grudem criticizes the Westminster Confession for accepting the "unbiblical" notion that God is "without passions." Millard Erickson surveys recent evangelical theologians and claims that "the traditional doctrine of impassibility is not the current one" among contemporary evangelicals. Erickson himself sees the problems with many of the traditional attributes and attempts to make some needed revisions.³³

The struggle evangelicals demonstrate in discriminating between genuine heresy and orthodox theological speculation is related to a failure to ground ourselves deeply in the mind of the Church during those centuries in which grievous heresies did indeed raise their heads.

Take, for example, Tertullian's struggle with the Gnostics in the third century. How could evangelical theologians adjudicate between Tertullian and his opponents on the basis of Scripture alone, when the disagreement

³³ Christopher A. Hall and John Sanders, *Does God Have a Future: A Debate on Divine Providence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003) 170.

between them includes divergent interpretations of the Bible itself? Tertullian recognizes that arguments based on Scripture alone will never convince his Gnostic opponents, for the simple reason that the Gnostics consider their own position to be based on the biblical text as fully as his own. Therefore Tertullian must take a different approach. He asks a simple question:

Who are the rightful owners of Scripture? . . . One point should be decided first, namely, who holds the faith to which the Bible belongs, and from whom, through whom, and to whom was the teaching delivered by which people became Christians? For only where the true Christian teaching and faith are evident, will be the true Scriptures, the true interpretations, and all the true Christian traditions be found.³⁴

I have noted already the unique status of Scripture as the normative manifestation of the DNA of the gospel. I have also referred to the rule of faith that authoritatively guides our understanding of that normative manifestation. I am now prepared to add the principle—to me, an obvious one—that the further one goes away from the original DNA source, the more likely mutations become. Therefore, we are always wise to pay particular attention to the gospel as it developed in the world of the Church fathers.

David Mills, a recent convert to Roman Catholicism from the Episcopal Church, argues just the opposite. Mills is convinced that we identify the DNA of the gospel more clearly by looking at the fully developed tree rather than newly sprouted sapling. “The Church did not stop developing in the early centuries, and it is only by knowing where she got to that we know which strand of the ancient thought on the matter was the right and the orthodox and the Catholic one.” Traditionalizing Protestants such as I, Mills contends, desire to be traditional “without being submitted to the tradition as a Catholic would wish,” and yet they claim “more authority for the tradition as the interpreter of Scripture than the Evangelical would wish.”³⁵ To the Catholic mind, Protestants who advocate a significant role for tradition attempt to “use tradition without the required commitment.” Or, to employ an image of Fr. Patrick Reardon, “their use of tradition is like teenagers having sex in the back seat of the car: They have not reached the level of commitment required before they take the pleasure. A Catholic sometimes feels that the traditionalizing Protestant wants the fun of tradition without paying the price of submission.”³⁶

The Roman Catholic perspective articulated by Mills and Reardon strikes me as fair and coherent. Why, then, do I not accept it? I, like other evangelical theologians, distinguish myself from those in the Roman communion by my willingness to acknowledge that it is possible for the tradition of the Church to detach itself from its biblical moorings. In plain terms, the Church may err in its interpretation of Scripture. The DNA contained in the seed of the gospel may occasionally mutate as the Church interprets the Bible. Thus,

³⁴ Tertullian, *On Prescriptions of Heretics* 19; cited in Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition* 91.

³⁵ David Mills, “Standing with Christ,” *Touchstone* 16/6 (July/August 2003) 83.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

infection and disease may mar the “fully developed tree” so that it requires pruning, whether the “tree” in question be Mills’s Roman Catholic tradition, or Reardon’s Orthodoxy, or Olson’s Baptist faith, or Hall’s Anglican perspective.

When I look at certain decisions the Roman church has made regarding, for instance, the conception, person, and role of Mary, I find myself hesitating. Catholic theologians themselves often acknowledge that the biblical basis for the immaculate conception of Mary is quite slim. When Pope Pius IX in the nineteenth century made the decision to promulgate Mary’s immaculate conception as dogma, he was advancing the tradition in a way that earlier developments did not clearly demand. So I have to ask whether this new development in Marian thinking represents a faithful replication of the original gospel DNA. The more I look, the less confident I become. It appears to me that the DNA has mutated at this point.

Of course, I am very aware that my application of the Protestant principle at this juncture is not fool-proof. The problem that I and all Protestant theologians face is that of trusting that my understanding of Scripture is more valid than that of the Roman theologians who met in the nineteenth century. I could employ the Protestant principle in a way that would make me like the renegade judge that we found so troubling a few moments ago. I could reject Pope Pius’s decision solely on the basis of my own reading of Scripture, without reference to communal authority of any kind. But here we see the danger again. On the same grounds, I could reject anything whatsoever, from a sacramental understanding of the Eucharist to a Trinitarian understanding of the divine nature. If my rejection of Marian dogma is made autonomously, I cut my own theological throat, for the Protestant principle then becomes a weapon that any isolated Christian, with no communal ties of any kind, can wield against any doctrine he happens to dislike.

So I am not rejecting the Marian dogmas autonomously. I consider them, instead, in community with other exegetes and theologians of all communions. If all the trusted voices present in the worldwide community of the Church—Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox—were to find themselves convinced that Marian dogma was a valid growth of the tradition, then I would need to step back and carefully reevaluate my own conclusions. But instead, when I look to the Church in its broadest sense, I find that I am not alone in my concern. Over the years many Christians have looked at these dogmas and have concluded, no, this development reflects a mutation of the original DNA of the gospel.

III. CONCLUSION

So here is our dilemma. We cannot allow tradition to grow without accountability to the Scripture on which it purports to be based. At the same time, we cannot allow private interpretation of Scripture to occur without accountability to the tradition that must authoritatively guide it. If tradition automatically trumps Scripture, we are doomed; if private interpretation of Scripture trumps tradition, we are equally doomed. What are

we to do? My specific proposal for tradition's role in evangelical theology, then, is threefold.

First, as evangelicals we affirm our faith and confidence in the Bible as the fundamental resource for theological reflection and for the confirmation and correction of theological proposals.

Yet the Bible is always an interpreted text. Therefore, second, we recognize that our direct reading of Scripture is no more infallible than the Church's traditional reading. Our reading needs to be corrected by tradition, and tradition needs to be corrected by our reading.

Hence, third, we affirm the richness of the traditions of our own distinct evangelical communions, while also humbly acknowledging the possibility, indeed probability, that our own traditions contain mutations from the original DNA of the gospel. These mutations will become more readily apparent to us as we draw nearer to the broader tradition of the Church, especially as represented in the ancient rule of faith and the key teachings of the formative patristic period. Of course, it will be natural to prioritize our own tradition. We will naturally tend to regard differences between our tradition and the broader tradition of the Church from our own vantage point: the broader tradition will seem to be the mutation, while the perspective of our own community will seem utterly self-evident. Only a deep-seated commitment to get to know some rather distant members of our extended ecclesial family—even those brothers and sisters who seem quite strange to us at first glance—will move us beyond the parochialism and prejudice that too often characterize evangelicalism and the theology it produces.