



# Missional Journal

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## The Old That is Strong Does Not Wither

So runs a prophecy regarding the return of the king in Tolkien's great trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. This line comes to mind when I consider the third of Biblical Seminary's theological convictions.

## The Indispensable Significance of the Christian Tradition

*We affirm the summary of Christian faith taught in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, and are committed to seeking wisdom from the history and traditions of the church.[1]*

Evangelicals generally steer shy of tradition. We are deeply indebted to the spirit of modernity and the myth of progress: New is better, old is passé. History has value only in confirming what we already believe or illustrating what went wrong in the past. We remember that Jesus said some hard things to the Pharisees about their traditions keeping them from true obedience to the Word of God (Mark 7:1-13; cf. Matthew 15:1-20). And our Protestant heritage teaches us that the medieval church got into trouble by exalting its traditions to the point of obscuring the Gospel. A radical re-commitment to the primacy of Scripture by the leaders of the Reformation was both understandable and necessary.

In most reactionary movements some things of value are gained, but some are lost. This was true in the aftermath of the Reformation. The principle of *sola Scriptura*--that the Bible is the ultimate authority for the faith and life of the church--set in motion a trajectory of anti-traditionalism among the various Protestant families which continues largely unabated to the present.[2] Thus the extraordinary gains achieved by a wholesale return to Scripture were offset to some extent by a

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loss of connection to the best elements of the Church's history.

Because Biblical Seminary desires to embrace all of the Spirit's work in the history of the church, we speak appreciatively of the Christian tradition. This does not mean that everything old is good. However, we recognize that the Spirit has spoken to and through God's people in every generation, and we believe there is a cumulative understanding of truth that enriches ours and succeeding generations of believers.

### 1. A lively (and living) dialogue

I used to think of tradition as a static deposit of ideas or practices fixed for all time--the antithesis to growth or adaptability, and actually subversive to the gospel. But suppose we change the metaphor. What if we think about tradition as a lively dialogue with God's people throughout history or as a conversation with good friends about the most important issues of our lives? Such a dialogue would not be dull or oppressive, but engaging and edifying!

The late Jaroslav Pelikan cleverly said, "**Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.**"[3] Most of us have had enough of *traditionalism* to last us a lifetime and beyond. But tradition in the positive sense is something else. It invites us to enter into conversation with faithful Christians of the past, to view their world (and ours) through other eyes, and to think about the truth of the gospel from a variety of perspectives. This dialogue takes place across time and cultures as a never-ending discussion.

This should not be understood as a "dialogue of despair--ever wrangling but never coming to the truth--but of *deepening*," says evangelical theologian Kevin Vanhoozer. Thus, "the dialogue between times and cultures is the condition of a *creative* understanding, where creative means not innovation ('We're making this up') but rather new insight ('This has meaning-potential we have not fully grasped'). Creative understanding is essentially a matter of understanding the same thing in a different context, thus understanding *more*." [4]

Vanhoozer also assumes that such dialogue is essential because "...no language or culture has a monopoly on God, the gospel, or theology." [5] Our knowing is partial and

perspectival. It is in our speaking and listening to one another that the Spirit fulfills the promise of Jesus to lead his disciples into all truth (John 16:13).[6]

## 2. A fresh expression of unity

Leaders of the missional church movement have called for a renewed commitment to the truth of the one body of Christ. If, in the words of Francis Schaeffer, we acknowledge that love is the "final apologetic" in the eyes of a cynical world, we must move beyond theoretical and abstract affirmations of the unity of God's people to concrete and visible expressions of that unity. Thomas Oden and J.I. Packer have called for a New Ecumenism--as opposed to the Old (modernistic) Ecumenism--"regrounded in classic Christianity and drawing together the biblically orthodox from pre-Reformation, Reformation, and post-Reformation traditions." [7]

The kind of dialogue we have been considering is essential to the practical outworking of unity. Too frequently evangelicals and fundamentalists demonstrate theological provincialism in focusing their attention only on Scripture **as it has been interpreted through the narrow grid of their own denominational or theological tradition** (Reformed, Lutheran, Dispensational, Pentecostal, etc.). Too often this results in an attitude of "my way or the highway." Oden and Packer acknowledge this as a weakness: "It is true that evangelical theology has often been marred by contentiousness and polemics that need not have been so harsh, and that its sights have usually been trained more on victory than on unity." [8]

Perhaps another way to think about the positive role of tradition is to see it as training in humility. When Christians only talk to those with whom they agree, all interpretations seem obvious and all reasoning seems valid. From our assured positions of theological "correctness" we are forced to conclude that Christians who differ from us are either ignorant (they don't know the correct system or method of interpretation), inconsistent (they fail to follow through with the system), or stiff-necked (they simply refuse to believe!).

But when we become conversation partners with the larger Christian tradition, we realize that we are encountering fellow pilgrims who love God and his Word as much (or more!) than we do and who are trying to live out the gospel faithfully in

their own generation. We begin to understand that their formulations of truth have powerfully affected us across the centuries in ways that are often unrecognized and unappreciated. Many "Bible-only" Christians do not understand that the shape and content of the NT canon itself is a result of the "traditioning" activities of the churches of the first five centuries. And any modern (or postmodern) believer who describes God with the word "Trinity" borrows theological language first articulated by the African theologian Tertullian and developed over several centuries in the face of numerous heretical distortions. So we actually stand on the shoulders of our theological ancestors. In theology and biblical interpretation it is also true that "others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor" (John 4:38).

Such knowledge should produce a chastened sense of our own "rightness." We learn the practical and important distinction between "what the Bible says" and "what I *think* it says." Not that we surrender all our convictions or adopt a lowest-common-denominator approach to truth! Rather, we learn to distinguish those things that have been clear to the vast majority of Christians across time and culture from those that have been common points of disagreement. On these latter points we recognize that good people--our brothers and sisters!--may disagree with us, and we commit to finding ways to express our unity despite of our differences.

### **3. A place of safety**

As the missional church explores what it means to live out the gospel faithfully in the new cultural situation of North America, it runs the risk of being co-opted by the very culture we wish to reach. Not that we should back away from the encounter. The missionary enterprise has always been risky. We must give one another permission to think new thoughts, to dream new (Kingdom) dreams, and to attempt great things for our Lord. The only alternative is to hunker down in the foxhole and reach (almost) no one. But we should not deceive ourselves: Following Jesus into the world is dangerous business!

So how do we protect ourselves? Well, we need to be prayerful and Spirit-dependent. We must continually immerse ourselves in Scripture as our supreme authority and forming narrative.[9] We must speak truthfully and lovingly with one

another about the challenges we face. And we must give ear to tradition.

Our convictions statement identifies the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed as particularly important examples of the classical Christian tradition. Our faculty and board subscribe to these formulations of the ancient church because we believe they represent the collective wisdom of our spiritual forebears that is discarded at our peril. Our statement reads: **We believe that by embracing and functioning within these ancient guidelines we can create a safe place for faculty and students to explore the mission of God in relation to contemporary culture.** There you have it--a safe place for a dangerous enterprise!

So we try to look forward because Jesus summons us to follow him into the future. We also remember where we have come from, because "the old that is strong does not wither." Thus we seek to be like the owner of the house "who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (Matthew 13:52).



[1] The full text of our **Convictions** is found here:

<http://www.biblical.edu/images/discover/Convictions0808.pdf>

[2] These developments are helpfully summarized by John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), pp. 98-112.

[3] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: 1 The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (University of Chicago, 1971), p. 9.

[4] Kevin Vanhoozer, "One Rule to Rule Them All?" in *Globalizing Theology*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold Netland (Baker, 2006), p. 121.

[5] Vanhoozer, p. 91.

[6] This thesis is developed in greater detail in the forthcoming book by John Franke, *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Truth* (Abingdon, 2009).

[7] J.I. Packer and Thomas C. Oden, *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus* (InterVarsity, 2004), p. 25.

[8] *Idem*

[9] See my previous article "True Truth":

<http://www.biblical.edu/pages/resources/missional-journal.html>