



TRADITION

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THE PRIMATE'S THEOLOGICAL Commission has been asked to think about the question "whether the blessing of same-sex unions is a faithful, Spirit-led development of Christian doctrine." As we deliberated, argued, and reflected together, what emerged as an issue was the very nature and assumptions inherent in the language we were using in our debates. Words like "tradition," "orthodoxy," "liberalism" were freighted with assumptions and emotion beyond the definition we might otherwise expect of them.¹ As this is the conundrum of communication, that we can only approximate intentional meaning for each other², I offer this essay to examine some of the perspectives and definitions we have brought to the task assigned to us. Of course, this analysis is inevitably incomplete as the discussion enters wider circles creating the potential for greater and greater diversity. However, merely discussing the terms we have been employing and the weighted value they have for us may allow us to continue to speak to each other across the issues that divide us. Therefore, I offer this brief reflection in the hope that others will find the discussion equally helpful in encouraging respect for each other's integrity and commitment to the good news of Jesus the Christ beyond the limitations of our own definitions and intentions. I have greatly simplified our historical debates in the interest of working from the underlying generalizations we bring to the discussion. Those of you who find yourselves in one "box" or another will be able to assign more of your own theologians and detail, but sometimes we employ our knowledge as a barrier to mutual respect or as a shield against intellectual assault, so I would caution about our abuse of erudition. As Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew: "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." (Matthew 13:52) Neither the old nor the new need to compete to retain value for us in the long memory of the faith.

Various ideas about authority undergird every discussion we can have about theology and the practice of the faith. Is the lived experience of certain parts of the church authoritative for all or at least for identifiable cells within

1. Dorothy Solle. *Thinking about God*. (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990), 5. "It [an inability to believe that communication is possible] expresses not only great loneliness but also an ideology of solitude. It says: we cannot share all the important things with one another; no one understands anyone else; there is no agreement about our central feelings and experiences; they escape language. This ideology is widespread: faith contradicts it.... It is the faith of the church – even if we often cannot see it because the church has been distorted to the point of being unrecognizable. But despite this the church represents a continuity; it lives by remembrance and promise. It listens to the witnesses of faith and recalls them, and it hands on the promises of the community."

2. Paulo Freire and Jürgen Habermas have written extensively on this subject, offering fruitful insight. Of particular note are: Jürgen Habermas. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. (Cambridge: Polity, 1984-1987), volume 1. Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York: Continuum, 2007).

the church?³ Can scripture be definitive for questions beyond the context in which a piece of sacred writing was created?⁴ What are the boundaries around the letter of the so-called law and the spirit of that law?⁵ Who decides when change will happen and how it is to happen? Has the church always had a diversity of opinion, even about core doctrine, or has there always been consensus about the basics of the faith; and what would those basics be?

Tradition is	Scripture is	The Church is
<p>Tradition is the foundational revelation of God’s will based on scriptural understandings and the pre-reformation teachings of the faith. As revelation unfolded in the world, it coalesced into foundation stones of the faith. At certain points in history, some stones became fixed as doctrine and can never be changed.</p>	<p>Scripture is the divine utterance to human beings. It is authoritative despite human limitation because it is a divine product. Because human history and culture change, the truth of scripture is held in the security of its agent, the church.</p>	<p>The church speaks with authority because it is both the agent of the apostles where the first witnesses to the resurrection and because it is charged with maintaining the truth of scripture. The church creates and maintains doctrine as part of its mandate of truth and order in the community of the faithful.</p>
<p>Tradition is “semper reformanda,” not perhaps always being changed, but with an openness to new insights into what had previously been understood as true and doctrinal. The scriptural foundation contains everything we need to gain insight.</p>	<p>Scripture is mostly a divine product. Although not always clearly understood and requiring constant study, scripture is authoritative. Scripture does not change; humans may deepen in discovering the truth embedded within scripture through the use of historical, linguistic and cultural insights.</p>	<p>The church, as the agent of God’s mysteries and truth, is the principal interpreter and re-assessor of the meaning of scripture.</p>
<p>Tradition is organic and changes as we learn insight into past ideas. In this sense, the revelation is evolutionary, unfolding and changing along with human understanding about what has transpired in the past.</p>	<p>Scripture is alive and responds to the reader and listener of every generation in new ways. It is authoritative, but requires constant study so that humans respond to it in increasingly accurate ways.</p>	<p>The church is the nexus of current knowledge and traditional wisdom and truth. Scripture, the church, and tradition are all incomplete in human understanding. Thus, their deeper truths are still unfolding.</p>
<p>Tradition is the interaction between what we have previously received as true and what we must now deconstruct in order to find acceptable understanding.</p>	<p>Scripture is a record of the writing of the past that attempted to convey a deep truth about the nature of human existence. It is impossible to fully apprehend what it has meant in the past, and what it means in the present is fluid and subjective.</p>	<p>The church has been an agent of stasis. It needs to become an agent of transformation, responding to the truth of the moment and prepared to divest itself of the illusions of a definite or definitive past. Apprehension of what is true is entirely subjective and relative to many factors.</p>

3. Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 262. “No single image or model of the church is capable of saying all that must be said about its nature and mission. . . . By word, sacrament, prayer, and life together, the church participates, in a provisional and incomplete way in the triune love of God; by its manifold ministries of witness and compassion and its service of justice, reconciliation, and peace in the world, the church participates, always imperfectly, in the mission of the triune God.”

4. This question is of critical importance in discussions about ethical and communal decision making. It was the core question when the church debated together about slavery and the role of women in the church, to name but a few modern issues.

5. If we speak of the law as relationship rather than as legislation, the various covenants between God and humanity describe ideal relationship rather than a system of rules. In the First Letter to the Corinthians 9:20-21 (NRSV), Paul deals with this question of the relativity of law: “To the Jews I became as a Jew in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one

The above chart attempts to present various ways of looking at how we come to theological, pastoral and ethical ideas. These ideas have arisen in certain historical eras, but none has ceased to exist. Indeed, each lives within its own logical and defensible reality. Should one constellation of ideas triumph over another? Should we engage in hierarchical thinking, or do we understand ourselves as in the midst of God's wisdom? The process of growing into God's own is still so obviously incomplete for humanity and for the church. When we cannot think with one mind, perhaps it is time for us to consider that challenge and resistance are natural and helpful forces, calling us to renew our trust and covenant with one another as the people of Christ. The image of the cross, the dynamic tension of opposites held together by the loving body of our Lord, needs to be the image for the church just as the resurrected Body is our hope and our promise. What that image demands of us is trust in the Holy One's presence in all that we do, perhaps even nudging and pushing us into these debates.

More difficult yet: to believe those who inhabit a different theological space may be involved in an equally important mission as valid as our own and, therefore, might understand the gospel in ways that may be unacceptable to us as constructs.

Are any of these perspectives on tradition a final solution? I think not, because it is clear that we continue to learn at least as much about ourselves and our world as we learn about the Holy One, the Beloved Jesus, and the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth. As in the quote from the gospel of Matthew, nothing is lost in the storehouse of wisdom. Everything is there for us to revisit and renew at the pulse of human need; it is not our storehouse, after all, but the wealth of the ages of intellectual faith filled reflection.

Together at the table where Christ is the host, we each offer our humble and partial truth, trusting that as these ideas are accepted, they will be corrected where in error and improved where they are healthy. As we work from these simple basics, it may be possible to hear each other's integrity and more clearly understand our mutual commitment to the faith, before we assume we know what each other means.

under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law."