

# **Your Word Is Truth, edited by Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus and The Free Church and the Early Church, edited by D.H. Williams**

reviewed by [Stanley J. Grenz](#) in the [October 23, 2002](#) issue

Protestants are not characteristically staunch upholders of tradition. Nor do they instinctively appeal to "tradition" when faced with life's crises. Even evangelical Protestants, though they view themselves as preservers of classical Christian orthodoxy in the face of the evils of secularism and liberalism, have been conditioned to look askance at appeals to "tradition" as antithetical to the great Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*.

The situation, however, is changing. A growing chorus of Protestants has been calling for a rediscovery of the creeds, worship and spirituality of the early church and, in some cases, even of the medieval church. Signs of the slow gestation of a new attitude toward tradition abound among evangelicals too. Many evangelical writers call for a new appropriation of theologies and practices that predate the Reformation. Evangelical presses publish commentaries on the exegetical offerings of patristic thinkers. And evangelical leaders engage in theological conversations with their Roman Catholic counterparts, no longer as adversaries but as colleagues in search of ways to express a common faith that not only takes scripture seriously but church tradition as well.

At the heart of these two volumes is the idea that the deposit of tradition is a treasure that all Christians own in common. This belief leads to an implicit optimism about the role that tradition can play in the life of the church today. Moreover, the writers share the conviction that only a retrieval of tradition can provide the needed stability to anchor the church--whether Roman Catholic or free church Protestant--in the midst of the storms endemic to contemporary Western culture.

As several of the essays point out, the event that opened the way for a possible Protestant-Catholic rapprochement on tradition was the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II sparked a reassessment of the notion that at the Council of Trent in the 16th century the Roman Catholic Church placed tradition alongside of scripture and endowed it with independent status as a second source of authoritative teaching. Catholic participants in the Evangelicals and Catholics Together project seek to put to rest this misunderstanding, which is widespread not only among Protestant critics but also among faithful Catholics. These thinkers advocate a more nuanced perspective that affirms a coinherence of scripture and tradition (to which some add "church" as a third element) and sees tradition in dynamic terms as the process of transmitting biblical truth under the Holy Spirit's guidance.

The evangelical essayists journey toward the convergence point from the opposite direction. Their task is to remind Protestants that rather than affirming *nuda scriptura* (or scripture abstracted out of the ongoing life of the church), the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* takes tradition seriously as the deposit of past expositions of biblical teaching.

Their shared willingness to affirm a central role for tradition in the church has not blinded the writers to the crucial differences that continue to divide Roman Catholic and Protestant perspectives. And the essayists are not of one mind regarding the authority that tradition carries relative to scripture. Whereas the Catholic representatives draw from the idea of coinherence the typically Catholic conclusion that scripture and tradition are to be revered with the same sense of devotion, their Protestant counterparts continue to uphold the Reformation legacy of the primacy of scripture.

Equally problematic is the lack of consensus regarding the role of the teaching authority (e.g., the magisterium) in the interplay of scripture and tradition within the life of the church. This latter issue brings to the fore what may well be the central concern of Protestants in the current debate. The evangelical essayists in the ECT project appear to be content to focus their discussion on the relationship of tradition to scripture. Their Catholic counterparts, however, rightly perceive that this question cannot be separated from larger ecclesiological concerns, at the crux of which is the role of the magisterium.

Because of this implicit connection, the calls of evangelical participants to abandon what D. Jeffrey Bingham terms "individualistic solipsism" are likely to awaken in

some Protestants fears about an insipid clericalism. Firsthand experience of the excesses that emerged when a hierarchically structured, clergy-dominated church wielded great power was one crucial factor leading to the rise of the free church movement, with its defense of private judgment. Unfortunately, indications abound in many parts of the world that a clergy-focused "will to power" in society, one that does not tolerate dissenting churches, has not yet met its demise.

Like the Catholic focus on the magisterium, the free church concern for liberty arises out of a particular ecclesiological vision. Sadly absent from both of these volumes, however, is a sustained engagement with the conflicting visions of the church that separate the free church believers (together with those evangelicals who have been influenced by free church ecclesiology) from Roman Catholics. The former view appeals to the church through the lens of a radical interpretation of the great Reformation principle of the priesthood of all believers. Their Catholic counterparts, in contrast, tend to see the church as a hermeneutical community closely bound up with one particular group within the church, namely, the incumbents of the church's teaching office. Until significant progress is made in overcoming this fundamental ecclesiological divide, joint statements about the coinherence of scripture and tradition have a hollow ring.

The appearance in such close proximity of these two volumes raises another question not addressed in any sustained manner by any of the essayists: Why are the heirs of both the magisterial and the radical reformation suddenly joining their Roman Catholic colleagues in exploring this particular theme? Although the burgeoning interest in tradition is likely due to many factors, its connection to the changing philosophical context of contemporary Western society ought not to be overlooked.

The current interest in the retrieval of tradition emerges as a part of a larger response to the demise of the kind of epistemological foundationalism that was prevalent throughout the modern era, a foundationalism allied with the empirical science that grew out of the Enlightenment. Among evangelicals, assumptions about the nature of knowledge that reigned in modern society evoked the optimistic belief that scientific methods of Bible study, together with the illuminating work of the Spirit, readily lead the "Bible-believing Christian" to the true meaning of the biblical texts, and this without recourse to either premodern exegetes or the hermeneutical traditions of the church. In recent years, however, the confidence of many evangelicals in the modern epistemological triunity of scripture, the individual

interpreter and the indwelling Spirit has been shaken, a situation that opens the door to a new trio--scripture, tradition and church.

Viewed in this light, what these volumes lack--and hence what appears to be absent from the various conferences and conversations that they represent--is a sustained discussion as to how tradition might function with scripture (and, I would add, with culture) in providing a more carefully articulated perspective regarding the locus of authority in the church. Until this occurs, reports that tradition's day has finally come must, unfortunately, be deemed premature.