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### The Story of Catholicism Part 3: The Elevation of Tradition

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# The Elevation of Tradition

By C. MERVYN MAXWELL

**W**HAT excitement the Vatican Council created by giving new status to the Bible in the Roman Church!

However, tradition still holds a cherished place in Catholic theology. The adoration of Mary, for example, occupies a higher official status today than it ever has, even though it is based almost entirely on tradition. Just the same, there is a genuine shift of emphasis in respect to Bible and tradition that is an encouraging aspect of Catholicism's current "renewal." Some writers are even saying, with ample justification, that there is more reverence for Bible study in some Catholic circles today than in many Protestant.

But, we may ask, how did the Catholic Church come to place tradition above the Bible in the first place? At the same time we may ask how it came to be that Catholics everywhere attach so much importance to the belief that the Roman pope is the successor to the apostle Peter. Like so many other characteristics of the Catholic Church, these beliefs arose very early in the story of Catholicism.

Last week we studied how persecution, the great external problem that confronted the early church, led to a controversy over what to do with backsliders, and how this in turn led to the codification of the "power of the keys." Even more serious than pagan persecution, however, both in fact and in effect, was the internal problem of Christian heresy. Tertullian could rejoice that "the blood of Christians is seed," because martyrdom produced new converts; but if heresy was the seed of anything, it was the seed of still more heresies. The greatest enemies of the church have always been

those of its own household. "Of your own selves," warned Paul, "shall men arise," "not sparing the flock" (Acts 20:30, 29). And arise they surely did, bringing Docetism, Montanism, Marcionism, Elkesaism, dynamistic and modalistic monarchianism, and worst of all, Gnosticism, right into the church.

As we have reviewed in the past two articles, even orthodox mainstream Christianity of the second and third centuries was far from being in perfect harmony with the New Testament. The "heresies" were much farther removed from the gospel.

The Montanist Christians were perhaps the best of the sectarians. Vexed by creeping secularism in the church they prayed for spirituality and preached about the Second Coming. But they erred in stressing fasts, celibacy, ecstatic prophecy, and the expected descent of the Holy City on two little towns in Asia Minor.

The Elkesaite Christians, on the other hand, were almost entirely bad. They claimed a marvelous and complicated baptismal formula that was

## Faith Unquestioning

By JOHN R. REAVES

Faith unquestioning,  
What eye hath not seen nor ear heard,  
Clings to the Rock of Ages  
Within the fortress of the Word,  
Grounded deep in the substance  
That is of the tree of life,  
We shall know when hope has  
triumphed,  
Past earth's sorrow, sin, and strife.

good for much more than the new birth—even for mad-dog bite.

But of all the heresies, Christian Gnosticism was the most perplexing and the most destructive. No one knows how many thousands of early Christians were drawn into it.

Gnostic teachers sprang up everywhere. Saturninus flourished in Antioch. Basilides in Egypt. Cerinthus in Asia Minor. Cerdo, Valentinus, and Marcion in Rome. Each teacher had his own theories but all agreed on this, that *gnosis* (Greek for "knowledge") is salvation. And what was the particular "knowledge" on which the Gnostics based their hopes? The belief that the God of the Old Testament was evil!

Christian Gnosticism had roots in pagan philosophy as well as in Christianity. It accepted the notion that matter is evil, that this earth and all the bodies that inhabit it are inherently bad, and that it follows from this that the God who created matter and men must Himself be bad. This is blasphemy, of course; but we can never hope to understand the world in which the early Catholic Church was molded unless we come to recognize that untold thousands of early Christians thought that such an idea as this was very reasonable indeed.

Gnostic Christians did not worship the Old Testament God. How could they? They had two Gods, and the one they worshiped was the gracious Father-God of the New Testament, the one with whom the Creator-God of the Old Testament—whom they dubbed "the Demiurge" or Craftsman—was in open conflict.

## Gnostics' Use of Bible

Strange as it may seem, Christian Gnostics made considerable use of the Bible to prove their points! To enable themselves to do so, most of them rephrased the Bible into a luxuriance of words: "In the invisible and ineffable heights above there exists a certain pre-existent Eon, and him they call Proarche, Propator, and Bythos, and he is invisible and nothing is able to comprehend him." On the other hand, one outstanding Christian Gnostic, Marcion by name, was a strict literalist. He rephrased nothing. What he didn't like he discarded.

The only New Testament books that Marcion accepted were the writings of Luke and Paul. The rest he rejected. Even ones he kept he revised, removing as spurious interpolations all sentences that seemed to favor the God of the Old Testament. He was the first Christian higher critic, and he "edited the New Testament with a knife." He had no use at all, of course, for any of the Old Testament. It was the book of the

Creator-God, in particular of the law-giving God. Out with the law, cried Marcion, and in with grace alone. Out with Matthew and James, and in with Paul and Luke.

And how the early Christians loved it! Marcion was so attractive to his fellow Christians that only 15 years after he began his work (in A.D. 140), Justin Martyr wrote of him that he had followers all around the world. In the course of time, prominent church leaders wrote major works against Marcion, in Gaul in the west, in Antioch in the east, in North Africa to the south, and in Rome.

Marcion was born in Pontus. In his alarm Tertullian wrote of Pontus that "the fiercest nations inhabit it. . . Their women . . . prefer warfare to marriage," and the climate is as rude as the people. "Nothing, however, in Pontus is so barbarous and sad as the fact that Marcion was born there." (*Against Marcion* I.1 in *ANF* III, 271, 272. Italics supplied.)

This deep concern expressed by the orthodox Christian leaders was amply justified. By denying the God of the Old Testament, Gnostics denied the Ten Commandments, and with them, the New Testament concepts of sin and grace and the atonement. By calling matter, including the body, evil, they disparaged Christian marriage and either espoused unnecessary asceticism or developed extreme libertinism. They vitiated the incarnation of Christ by saying that since the Son of the Father-God would not possibly have taken upon Himself a body made by the "evil" Creator-God, Jesus actually did not have a real human body. And as for the Sabbath? What Gnostic Christian would have observed a weekly memorial to the handiwork of an evil God? As the influential Gnostic Valentinus said, "All the prophets and the Law spoke from [the inspiration of] the Demiurge, a foolish God; they themselves were fools who knew nothing" (Grant, *Second-Century Christianity*, p. 26).

### Tradition Placed Above Scripture

But how did the presence of heresy in the early church lead to the doctrines of tradition above Scripture and of apostolic succession? In this way: Gnostic Christians used the Bible! They claimed, in fact, that they were the only true interpreters of it. And they had their own rules of interpretation; either they allegorized it all away, or they declared every New Testament text that favored the law to be an interpolation. In arguing with them, what could a person do?

If an orthodox pastor, visiting in the home of a church member, tried to argue with a visiting Gnostic con-

vert, what could he say? Every time he quoted a scripture, the Gnostic would say either that it meant something different or that it didn't belong in the Bible.

Every error of Gnosticism could, of course, be refuted through Bible study, but this took time and patience. It was quicker and easier to cite the church as authority than to study Scripture under such circumstances. And this is how the custom arose of appealing to tradition as authority instead of to the Bible. In refuting heresies, even in the second and third centuries, it was found to be more efficient to say, "It must be our way because the church has always believed it to be so," than to work everything out again and again from the Bible.



The heresies were new, too; younger than orthodox Christianity. So it was convenient to add the argument that they must be false because they were not old; not so old as the churches that had been founded by the apostles, nor as holy, either, because their leaders were self-appointed men who could not trace their ordination back through a succession of bishops to the apostles (apostolic succession).

In the early third century Tertullian challenged the Gnostics: "Let them produce the original records of their churches; let them unfold the roll of their bishops, running down in due succession from the beginning." He reflected the attitude of many Christians when he claimed that only the orthodox had a right to use the Scriptures, anyway: "They [the Gnostics] have acquired no right to the Christian Scriptures. . . Indeed, Marcion, by what right do you hew my wood? By whose permission, Valentinus, are you diverting the streams of my fountain? . . . I possessed it before you. . . I am the heir of the apostles." In exasperation he declared,

"We are therefore come to (the gist of) our position. . . We oppose to them this step above all others, of not admitting them to any discussion of the Scriptures." And his final counsel of despair: "Our appeal, therefore, *must not be made to the Scriptures.*" (*On Prescription Against Heretics*, 32, 37, 15, 19 in *ANF* III, 258, 261, 250, 251. Italics supplied.)

### The Problem of Apostolic Origin

But what about those Christian churches which, though thoroughly orthodox, could not claim to have been founded by an apostle? (Though Paul and John are known to have founded many churches in Asia Minor and Greece, there is no record that any apostle ever visited France, for instance.) If orthodox Christians were challenging the heretics to prove that apostles had founded *their* churches, what could the orthodox do who could not prove that apostles had founded their own churches?

Irenaeus, who lived in Gaul and so was faced with this problem, came up with a solution: They could attempt to prove, he asserted, that what they believed in their local churches *agreed with* what was being taught by the bishops of an unquestionably apostolic church. The chief "apostolic" church in Western Europe was, of course, the church in Rome; and this is how the custom arose of giving so much importance to the apostolic succession of the pope of Rome and to the traditions to which he held. Irenaeus himself, as early as around A.D. 185, gave a list by name of all the bishops of Rome from the days of the apostle Peter in order to prove their apostolic succession, and accompanied the list with this famous statement:

"It is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its pre-eminent authority, . . . inasmuch as the apostolic tradition has been preserved [there] continuously." (*Against Heresies* III.3.2 in *ANF* I, 415, 416.)

The shadow that hung over sixteenth-century Inquisition courtrooms where Protestants were told to forget their scriptural defense and simply recant or perish, was a very long shadow indeed. Likewise, the debate at the Second Vatican Council over the relative authorities of Scripture and tradition involved practices that go back to the very beginnings of the story of Catholicism.

Thus, as early as the second and third centuries, Christian leaders found it easier to combat heresy with apostolic succession and long-cherished tradition than by patient exposition of God's Word.

(Continued next week)