

By Word and By Spirit

Inspired Oral Tradition in the New Testament

Rachel Evans

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Introduction

Contemporary Evangelical biblical scholars have often been at odds with the dating assigned by papyrologists to early fragments of the New Testament. For while Paul's Epistle to the Galatians and his First Epistle to the Corinthians were likely written in the early 50s,¹ some of the New Testament is believed by most scholars to have been written near the close of the first century, up to two generations after the Church's inception.² Moreover, the dating of biblical texts is necessarily an estimate, as even the earliest extant fragment of a Gospel text dates to the last quarter of the second century,³ which allows scholars to argue for yet later dates. Furthermore, the combination of the expense of papyri and the commonness of illiteracy among the early Christians rendered these texts, as such, literarily inaccessible to most early believers.⁴

In wishing to affirm that these texts were written close to the lifetime of Jesus, Evangelical scholars sometimes argue for unlikely dates in ways that overlook the findings of the specialists, even though papyrologists have a tendency to date fragments from the New

¹ Hans Dieter Betz places these letters between 50 and 55 A.D., and 53 and 55 A.D., respectively. See "The Epistle to the Galatians," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992, Vol. 2, pp. 872-875, p. 872; and "The First Epistle to the Corinthians," *ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 1139-1148, p. 1140 (co-authored by Margaret M. Mitchell).

² If Pentecost may be considered the beginning of the Church. Robert Kysar places the composition of the Gospel of John at the close of the first century ("Gospel of John," *ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 912-931, pp. 918-920). Luke Timothy Johnson places Luke-Acts between 80 and 85 A.D. ("Book of Luke-Acts," *ibid.*, vol. 4, pp.403-420, p. 404). Adela Yarbro Collins dates Revelation between 95-98 A.D. ("Book of Revelation," *ibid.*, vol. 5, pp. 694-708, p. 701.) It is quite probable that this is the latest book of the New Testament. While many scholars would place the pastoral, Petrine, and the Johannine epistles in the early second century, such dating necessitates a denial of apostolic authorship. (Elliott, John H., "Second Epistle of Peter," *ibid.*, vol. 5, pp. 282-287, p. 287; Kysar, Robert, "Epistles of John," *ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 900-912, p. 909; Quinn, Jerome D., "Epistles of Timothy and Titus," *ibid.*, vol. 6, pp. 560-571, pp. 568-569.)

³ Turner, Eric G. *The Typology of the Early Codex*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977, p. 148.

⁴ While Theodore Skeat argues that papyrus was much less expensive than is commonly supposed, this is from the standpoint of an Egyptian earning more than a "prosperous Egyptian villager," and much of his argument does not apply to lower class individuals and those living in areas where papyrus was less plentiful ("Was Papyrus regarded as 'cheap' or 'expensive' in the Ancient World?" *The Collected Biblical Writings of T.C. Skeat*, Boston, MA: Brill, 2004, pp. 88-105, p. 88). According to William V. Harris, accessibility to papyrus outside of Egypt was limited to the elite (pp. 194-195), and likewise few in the lower classes were literate at the time of Christianity's inception (*Ancient Literacy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). Since most of the earliest Christians were from such social strata, it is unlikely that any more than a small minority had the finances or skills necessary to own and read the New Testament texts themselves (although they were generally still able to hear at least certain books read in church services cf. Col. 4:16).

Testament as early as they feel fit. Various Evangelical scholars and leaders have asserted that the authority of Scripture as a whole and of its constituent parts mandates a very early date for writing of a complete New Testament.⁵ Moreover, a belief in Scriptural authority is very often intertwined with an anachronistic preoccupation with the written text as the only authoritative source available to the early Christians. If a substantial lapse of time is allowed between the founding of the Church and the writing of the New Testament, Evangelical scholars wonder how these first recipients of the faith, without the direct use of literary sources, did in fact receive the faith. For while some Christian communities of the first century may have enjoyed direct interaction with the apostles, many more, especially as Christianity spread into new areas, were bereft of such a privilege. In light of this, those who believe the New Testament to be binding for all Christians, may find themselves troubled by a seeming lack of what they would consider “inspired” writings among the earliest Christians. Without possession of a written Scripture, did such men and women of faith have any source which they considered authoritative? How was the apostolic message received and transmitted, and was this transmission believed to be an inspired process in the same way as that of written transmission?

Much of the confusion which ensues in addressing these problems comes from a misunderstanding of the relationship between Scripture and oral tradition in the first centuries of Christendom. In his *Synoptic Tradition*, Rudolph Bultmann argues for an “organic connection” between the written and oral traditions of the early Church, since, in his view, both contained essentially the same material and were treated as equally authoritative.⁶ Yet the Protestant trust in *Sola Scriptura* has led some modern Evangelical circles to distrust church “tradition,” or what

⁵Cf. Clark, Gordon H. “The Evangelical Theological Society Tomorrow.” The Presidential Address delivered at the annual meeting of The Evangelical Theological Society on December 29, 1965, at The Free Will Baptist College, Nashville, Tennessee.

⁶ Bultmann, Rudolph. *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*. Marsh, John, trans. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1963, p. 91.

is perceived as such.⁷ In attempting to distinguish tradition from Scripture, one may easily be induced to create an anomaly foreign to the New Testament era. Indeed, as F.F. Bruce points out, according to the New Testament writers and to contemporary understanding of their writings, Scripture is itself a tradition.⁸ According to Bruce, then, in the minds of early Christians, a separation lies not between Scripture and tradition, but between divine and human traditions, with the former eventually coming to be constituted as Scripture.⁹

Having established this point, we may more accurately define the concept of tradition in light of its usage in the Gospels and Pauline epistles. In the following examination, we shall find among the Christians of the first century a trust in the authenticity of the apostolic tradition, both written and oral, as divinely inspired. Such an examination shall counteract the idea of discontinuity within the Christian faith between the Christological events and the writing of them, as well as the misconception that illiterate believers were deprived of what was considered to be reliable testimony concerning the teachings of Christ and the apostles. Rather, as the Christian tradition was oral first and written second, a more thorough understanding of its orality will help to clarify not only why oral tradition was considered authentic, but also how early Christians could still have seen themselves as recipients of the inspired Word of God.

⁷ This problem is discussed by Ellen Flesseman-van Leer in "Present-day Frontiers in the Discussion about Tradition," *Holy Book and Holy Tradition*. Bruce, F.F. and Rupp, E.G., ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1968, pp. 154-170. The problem, moreover, of ignoring the oral tradition's connection with Scripture is not unique to Evangelicalism. Werner Kelber has also lamented the "tendency among biblical scholars [generally] to think predominantly, or even exclusively, in literary, linear, and visual terms." (*The Oral and the Written Gospel*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983, p. 2.)

⁸ Bruce, F.F. "Scripture and Tradition in the New Testament," *Holy Book and Holy Tradition*, pp. 68-93, p. 68.

⁹ Ibid.

Part 1: The Cultural and Religious Context

Ancient Greek Conceptions of Inspiration and Orality

Orality in Greek Religion

It may be said, if such a general statement regarding such a diverse category is possible, that much of ancient Greek religion grew out of oral tradition. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* of Homer were in many ways the most influential texts of Greek culture. Their stories contain and form a wide range of Greek mythology, and, while they are not religious texts, they reflect and standardized Greek religiosity.¹⁰ Homer's works were memorized by schoolchildren, retained into adulthood, and celebrated through rehearsal in contests and other venues.¹¹ Most scholars concur that these poems were likely written down within one or two centuries of their composition, in 650 B.C., and possibly before.¹² Yet they are themselves typically considered a poetic synthesis of a wide variety of oral traditions extant in Hellenic Ionia at the time of Homer,¹³ which were reworked and assembled into the two works.¹⁴ They were thus born out of oral tradition, and were passed down as a predominantly oral, albeit simultaneously literary tradition.

Yet even as Homer's poems were passed down by many in primarily oral form, they were subject to change as each community or performer saw fit, allowing for various versions of the same tradition.¹⁵ Still, Kirk points out, in comparison to the more fluid traditions found in

¹⁰ Bruit Zaidman, Louise and Schmitt Pantel, Pauline. *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 16.

¹¹ Kirk, Geoffrey Stephen. *Homer and the Oral Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 2. For an analysis of the pre-Homeric oral tradition from which Homer drew his material, see Sterling Dow's "The Linear Scripts and the Tablets as Historical Documents: Literacy in Minoan and Mycenaean Lands," from *The Cambridge Ancient History: C. 1800-1380 B.C., Vol. II, Part 1*. Crew, P. Mack, Edwards, I.E.S., Bury, J.B., Gadd, Cyril John, Geoffrey, Nicholas, Hammond, Lemprière, and Sollberger, E., eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp.582-608.

¹⁴ Scholars debate who is responsible for the final products, and to what extent the two works were original.

¹⁵ Kirk, *Ibid.*, p. 8.

certain other oral cultures, there were mainly only “minor deviations” from the original.¹⁶ There was, in other words, consistency among traditions, yet without a strict adherence to a verbally fixed form, as we shall see was the case in Jewish and Christian antiquity.

In any case, the trust which was placed in oral tradition attests the “strength of ancient memories.”¹⁷ In an oral society, it is natural that certain human memories will, by necessity, be more dependable than in its literate counterpart. Therefore, “we must always beware of underestimating the best ancient memories,”¹⁸ and, if the relationship is congruent, even those of average citizens, by viewing their oral traditions through the lens of our own graphocentric society.

Inspiration in Homer, Plato, and Mantic Religion

Interestingly enough, despite the centrality of both oral and written traditions, Greek religion also found place for the spontaneity of inspired rhetoric as a unique entity disconnected from memory, even to the extent that it superseded human intellect altogether. The idea of divine inspiration is found in various authoritative sources, each of which emphasize the power of the god who inspires over and against natural human capability to differing degrees. Homer speaks of gods imbuing mortals with life, strength, and virtues,¹⁹ and invokes the power of the Muses to speak through him.²⁰ Plato describes inspiration as the manner in which God not only transcends a man’s cognition, but, more or less, temporarily disables it, in order to speak more directly through him. According to Plato, when Socrates conjectures that his words are given by

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 125. However, it must be noted that “the original” exists only in theory, for no record of the autograph is extant, and it is unknown whether such a thing existed.

¹⁷ Harris, William. *Ancient Literacy*, p. 30.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 301. See also Walter J. Ong’s analysis of the dynamics of oral tradition within oral cultures and his defense of its reliability in this context, *Op. Cit.*, passim.

¹⁹ *Iliad*, 5:596, 10:482, 20:110.

²⁰ *Iliad 1:1*. See also the introduction to Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, thought by most to be composed about a half-century after Homer’s works. Subsequent Greek poets were also dependent upon the Muses for inspiration (Sara Ahbel-Rappe, personal conversation, 22 March 2009.)

gods or some other non-human source, he describes his inspiration as a sort of madness by which he has lost control.²¹

Another pertinent example of Greek inspiration is the use of oracles, which were given at the request of those broaching serious decisions. Such oracles, given in a variety of expressions, were taken quite seriously, and sometimes decided major political decisions.²² The most prestigious source of oracles in Greek antiquity was the Pythia at Delphi, an elderly woman who was consulted regularly at the Apollonian temple. In giving her oracle in response, it was understood that the Pythia would be possessed by the spirit of Apollo, and her mantic state seemed to imitate that described by Socrates. The words she uttered were not her own, but Apollo's, in such a way that he may be said to exhale through her.²³ However, while they were given orally, we should note that some of these oracles were written down and studied as literary texts. Still, the notion of God's words being conveyed through those who were so spiritually possessed remains. Later, we shall discuss an analogous, yet notably different, concept in Christianity of divine prophesy as θεόπνευστος, generally translated "inspired," but literally, "God-breathed."²⁴

Thus, Christianity seems to have paralleled some aspects of Greek oral inspiration, most especially in its utilization of oral tradition as a trustworthy source of history. Further, Christianity seems to echo the idea that God speaks through men, although in quite a different way, as we shall see later. Suffice it to say here that the gods who were thought to speak through the Greeks were known to sometimes deceive men,²⁵ thereby rendering oracles, even those

²¹ Socrates calls this madness "a divine release from the customary habits." Phaedrus, *Ibid.*, 265a. See also 262d.

²² Bruit Zaidman and Pantel Schmitt, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, p. 127.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 127-128.

²⁴ This term is used only once in the New Testament, in 2 Tim. 3:16.

²⁵ Perhaps the most ready example is that of the Trojan horse, a feigned gift of the Greeks, completed with the help of the gods, and in which hid an army of men ready to kill its recipients. The myth is given in Virgil's *The Aeneid* and Quintus of Smyrna's *The War at Troy*.

which were considered authentic, less trustworthy than the God of the Christians, who “never lies.”²⁶

Having outlined part of the cultural context into which Christianity was born, we now proceed to the parent religion from which it proceeded, antique Judaism.

The Old Testament

Its Oral Nature

In the Judaic religio-cultural framework, oral tradition was the foundation of communal faith.²⁷ We may see this embodied in the custom of gathering in the temple to hear the oral presentation of the law, as prescribed in Deuteronomy 31:10-13,²⁸ as well as in the frequent biblical commands to tell and retell stories of past events and proclamations to one’s children, who in turn are expected to pass on the traditions to the next generation.²⁹

Moreover, oral preservation of religious history and doctrine is evidenced by the fact of its existence without written Scripture for quite some time: even the most conservative theologians contend that the written form of the Book of Genesis was not even begun until Moses, approximately two-and-a-half millennia after its primeval events.³⁰ Up until that time, it would seem that the histories outlined in Genesis had been remembered through their oral rehearsal. Moreover, as Klaus Koch points out, this pattern of generations of oral transmission

²⁶ Tit. 1:2. Note also the biblical concept summarized by Christ in Jn. 17:17b: “Thy word is truth.”

²⁷ Coward, Harold G. *Sacred Word and Sacred Text*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988. p. 34.

²⁸ “And Moses commanded them, ‘At the end of every seven years, at the set time of the year of release, at the feast of booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place which he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live in the land which you are going over the Jordan to possess.’” Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from *The Revised Standard Version of the Bible*. New York, NY: Thomas Nelson, 1952, 1971.

²⁹ Joel 1:3 gives a prime example of this: “Tell your children about it, / let your children tell their children, / and their children another generation.”

³⁰ Hence it is referred to as “the first book of Moses.” Cf. Henry, Matthew. “Genesis,” *Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol. 1*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006, pp. 1-2.

preceding transcription is evident in other Old Testament texts.³¹ While this is not necessarily the case for all Old Testament books,³² these cases show that traditions were indeed passed down orally for long periods of time, and that their eventual transcriptions into Scripture were yet held to be authoritative.

It is notable also that such transcriptions did not bring oral memory to an end. Even during and after the various books which comprise the Torah were written, the LORD is said to lay out a plan for Israel to remember His actions and words in an oral manner throughout the Old Testament. The psalmist says, “My mouth will tell of thy righteous acts, /of thy deeds of salvation all the day...”³³ The biblical texts do not allow for God’s words to remain silently enclosed in a written document to be accessed only through private reading, a practice which would hardly have been feasible in ancient Israel anyway. Indeed, God’s actions were recounted again and again both daily and throughout the year through oral recitation. While the written texts may be relied upon as a reference, the Israelites are commanded to teach their children the divine words by “talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”³⁴ Just as the words of the Law and the Prophets were initially presented orally,³⁵ so they are to be remembered orally by those who

³¹ Koch gives Pro. 25:1 as evidence: “These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, transcribed” (*New American Standard Bible*. La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995). Hezekiah reigned approximately three centuries after Solomon, implying that the aforementioned proverbs had survived through oral tradition until that time. Koch, Klaus. *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition: The Form-Critical Method*. Cupitt, S.M., trans. New York, NY: Macmillan, 1969, p. 81.

³² The rest of the Pentateuch, for example, is held by the same conservative theologians (as well as the author of the texts) to be written by Moses as well, shortly after being divinely given, although not simultaneous with the divine instruction (Ex. 17:14, 24:4, 34:27, Deut. 31:9, 24-26). An apparent exception occurs in the case of the Ten Commandments, which are said to be written by the finger of God (Ex. 31:18). Herein the theological idea behind the narrative is expressed less through the process of writing than through the unchangeableness and permanence of God’s law.

³³ Ps. 71:15a.

³⁴ Deut. 11:19b.

³⁵ Prophets are commanded at various times to “speak” the words of God (see 1 Kg. 22:14, Jer. 1:7b as examples). The prophets record themselves as being inspired in such a way that the words they speak may be called the “word of the Lord” and as they are merely repeated, they may be introduced with the phrase, “Thus says the Lord.” See Ex.

receive them and pass them on to their children.

According to Birger Gerhardsson, moreover, rote memorization of Scripture was a key feature of first-century Palestinian Judaism. Children were impressed with the words of the text from a young age, and teachers were expected to rehearse long streams of text for the preservation of communal memory. It was not enough for scribes to faithfully copy the written word. Rather, it was imperative that the community be immersed in the word through daily and repetitive speech and hearing.³⁶

Oral Tradition and Scripture

Further, the reading of the inspired text in the temple, itself an oral presentation, was accompanied by Levitical interpretation. In Nehemiah 8:8, it is written that the priests “gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” The Law itself had given the priests charge over its administration, with the implication that the words of the priests were in some sense inspired by God.³⁷ While it is noteworthy that these were interpretations of an already existing text, and were not themselves recorded, that does not imply that the oral tradition was not also inherently of God. According to the Book of Jeremiah, Israel’s “shepherds” are used to impart a divine gift of understanding which empowers their recipients to obey God’s laws.³⁸ Thus, while their teaching is unwritten, it is yet authoritative in the Israelite community by virtue of the teachers’ divine appointment. Furthermore, in Genesis, Joseph asks regarding his own

5:1, et. al.; Jer. 43:1; Ez. 3:27a; Hos. 1:2a. Commands to “write” the words which prophets receive are given separately, often well after they were orally delivered (Deut. 27:3, Jer. 36:2, among others; although exceptions occur, as in Isa. 8:1, Dan. 7:1).

³⁶ Gerhardsson, Birger. *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961, pp. 63-65.

³⁷ In the case of an unsolved murder, for example, the investigation is handled by the priests: ““And the priests the sons of Levi shall come forward, for the LORD your God has chosen them to minister to him and to bless in the name of the LORD, and by their word every dispute and every assault shall be settled”” (Deut. 21:5). See also 17:9, 19:16-17, 24:8

³⁸ Jer. 3:15.

interpretations of dreams, “Do not interpretations belong to God?”³⁹ In the context of his question, men who strive to interpret dreams through their own understanding fail, for it is only through divine aid that one who is gifted with the ability to interpret may do so. Dreams, too, can be unwritten forms of divine communication with men, as are their interpretations. Yet they are the infused with an authority which is given, according to Joseph, by God. It would seem that these texts do not limit divine proclamation to that recorded in an existing text. Just as God alone gives both the Torah and priests to interpret it, so He gives both the dreams and men to explain them.

We see, then, that the oral readings of authoritative texts were accompanied by oral explanations by divinely appointed men. Still, the tradition which is valued highly as such is the invariable revelation imparted to the prophets, with the claim to divine origin. What is passed down, remembered, treasured, and rehearsed in the lives of the Israelites is an oral version, whether prior or subsequent to their transcription, of the inspired texts themselves. It is this tradition which they would “arise and tell...to their children.”⁴⁰

Henceforth arguments regarding oral tradition will be made using the Judaic definition explained above, as this is the context into which early Christianity was born.

Part 2: The Writings of the Evangelists

The Gospels

Oral Tradition and the Gospels

In the New Testament, we see the pattern of oral transmission continued. We shall discuss later how these texts treated the idea of oral tradition, and how this idea continued in the Early Church. Yet first, it is notable that the Gospels lent themselves to memorization and

³⁹ Gen. 40:8.

⁴⁰ Ps. 78:6b.

rehearsal. According to Werner Kelber, the Gospel of Mark in particular exemplifies this style of oral storytelling in written form: the simplified story outlines, alliteration, sequences of plot, and various other literary techniques allowed for greater ease in oral transmission.⁴¹ Others, including Harold G. Coward,⁴² as well as the many of the contributors to *Performing the Gospel*, a recent anthology of essays in honor of Kelber,⁴³ have echoed and elaborated on his premise that these literary devices demonstrate a text's oral nature and ease of memorization.

In light of this, how did Mark and the other Gospel writers treat oral tradition? If we assume that Mark, at least, desired that his own Gospel be memorized and passed down within the Church, a point implied by his literary style, may we surmise that he considered its oral performance to be as authoritative as its written form? Certainly this seems to be a logical conclusion. Still, Mark records Jesus' denunciation of the Pharisaical law regarding a son who assigns his profits, which Jesus contends rightly belong to his parents, to the synagogue. Herein he contrasts "the commandment" (ἐντολή)⁴⁴ or "word of God" (τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ)⁴⁵ and "the tradition of men" (τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων),⁴⁶ or the "tradition" which his hearers "have handed on" (τῆ παραδόσει ὑμῶν ἣ παρεδώκατε).⁴⁷ What does Christ reject in this statement, and what does this rejection imply about the interrelationship between tradition and the written Torah?

Frederick Fyvie Bruce voices the opinion of many scholars when he sees in this text a dichotomy between traditions of divine and human origins, rather than between their oral and

⁴¹ Kelber, Werner. *The Oral and the Written Gospel*.

⁴² Coward. *Sacred Word and Sacred Text*, pp. 39-46.

⁴³ Horsley, Richard A., Draper, Jonathan A., and Foley, John Miles. *Performing the Gospel: Essays Dedicated to Werner Kelber*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006.

⁴⁴ Mk. 7:8. See also the preceding verses, as well as Mt. 15:1-9 for a second account on the same issue.

⁴⁵ Mk. 7:13.

⁴⁶ Mk. 7:8.

⁴⁷ Mk. 7:13.

written forms.⁴⁸ While the Pharisaical laws, “which nullified the plain sense of the Word of God,”⁴⁹ were condemned by Christ, by no means does he reject tradition altogether. Rather, Christ here addresses a direct conflict between what is Scripture and what is not, thereby asserting that laws which have no basis in the Torah are harmful appendages to the Word of God. He goes on to teach that traditions which contradict what has previously been revealed through Scripture must be discarded. Such teachings are of men, and not of God, and herein lies the litmus test for tradition’s authority.

Alternatively, *παράδωμι*, used above to denote the way in which false traditions were “handed down,” is used to describe the way in which the Gospel is said to be “delivered” in Luke. His prologue begins, “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered (*παράδωμι*) to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word...⁵⁰ According to Richard Bauckham, Luke most likely described words received through personal interaction with the “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word,” for the emphasis on eyewitness accounts must entail Luke’s own direct verbal communication with these men, lest the direct connection be rendered less effective.⁵¹ At the same time, Luke writes to his Patron, Theophilus, “that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.”⁵² Theophilus, then, has already received a trustworthy Gospel, yet apparently in unwritten form. Luke, however, wishes to assure him of its trustworthiness through the writing of an authoritative Gospel, by virtue of his close contact with the initiators of the tradition, the apostles. He does not seek to supersede

⁴⁸ Bruce, F.F. “Scripture and Tradition in the New Testament.” From *Holy Book and Holy Tradition*, Bruce, F.F. and Rupp, E.G., ed. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968, pp. 68-93, p. 69.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Lk. 1:1-2.

⁵¹ Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006, p. 116-124.

⁵² Lk. 1:4.

the oral tradition Theophilus has already learned, but rather to establish its certainty.

While we shall more thoroughly examine the meaning of παραδίδομι later, suffice it to say that godly traditions, which are venerated as the Gospel of Christ, are “handed down” in a similar manner, orally and literarily, as those which are deemed false.

The Inspiration of Oral Speech

Mark’s Gospel also accepts the idea of inspired speech, and does not limit inspiration to written Scripture alone. Christ is recorded as directing his apostles in their response to coming persecutions: ““And when they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say; but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.””⁵³ The words of the apostles are said not to be their own, but God’s. Their oral presentation, then, to use a later term, may be said to be divinely inspired, in the same way that the prophets were said at times to speak the words of God.⁵⁴ For in like manner, Jesus is recorded as introducing a verse from Psalms with the claim that it was spoken through David while ““inspired by the Holy Spirit.””⁵⁵ Such examples of prophetic inspiration are complementary to those regarding apostolic inspiration, as the pairing of the prophets and apostles as parallel groups would become common in the Early Church.⁵⁶

It is helpful also to note parallel passages in the remaining Gospels. In his account, Matthew records the conclusion of Christ’s statement in a similar manner: “for it is not you who

⁵³ Mk. 13:11.

⁵⁴ Dt. 18:20 presents the view that a true prophet is to speak nothing which is not of divine origin: ““But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.”” See also 2 Chr. 36:12, as well as the frequent prophetic introduction: “The word of the LORD came to me...” (or to the said prophet), or “Thus says the Lord...” which show that the words of a true prophet, when spoken in the name of the Lord, are inspired by him. Examples are found in 1 Kg. 18:1, 1 Chr. 22:8, Jer. 1:4, Ez. 3:16, among various other passages.

⁵⁵ Mk. 12:36.

⁵⁶ Even in the Gospel of Luke, we find the phrase ““prophets and apostles”” (11:49ff).

speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”⁵⁷ This, too, is reminiscent of Matthew’s introduction of a quotation from Hosea, which he describes as “what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.”⁵⁸ Luke echoes this point in his quotation of Zacharias, who refers to God’s promises which “he proclaimed, by the mouth of his holy prophets from ancient times.”⁵⁹ This passage may be understood as indicating that the prophets are mere instruments by which God proclaims prophecies, and contribute nothing to it themselves.

However, Luke’s account of Christ’s admonition of his apostles offers an interesting paraphrase which will prove instrumental to a discussion of oral transmission and memory. Christ is recorded as promising that “the Holy Spirit will teach (διδάξει) you in that very hour what you ought to say.”⁶⁰ While the concept of inspiration portrayed in Matthew and Mark show divine involvement in human speech, Luke’s elaboration upon this point discredits the notion that the apostles are but unconscious vessels through whom the Word of God passes. Rather, the verb used here implies the Holy Spirit’s direction followed by the individual’s action. If the Holy Spirit is to “teach” them what they “ought to say,” then we may expect a conscious reception of the teaching, and subsequently the apostles’ words in accordance with the teaching in the specified hour of trial.

John’s Gospel sheds yet more light on the way in which the apostles are to proclaim the words which they receive, though perhaps in a different context. “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance (διδάξει πάντα καὶ ὑπομνήσει) all that I have said to you.”⁶¹ Inspiration, then, applies not only to spontaneous generation of thoughts, which may be the sense of the Holy

⁵⁷ Mt. 10:20.

⁵⁸ Mt. 2:15.

⁵⁹ Lk 1:70ff. Trans. from the *New Jerusalem Bible*, Henry Wansbrough, ed. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1985.

⁶⁰ Lk. 12:12b.

⁶¹ Jn 14:26.

Spirit’s “teaching,” but also to a certain ability given to the apostles’ memory. In order to be reminded of them, the words must already exist within the apostles’ minds, whether through natural or supernatural teaching. Yet it is by divine power that they are retained and brought forth accurately and completely.

Non-Apostolic Oral Inspiration

Luke also records three instances in which devout individuals seem to experience some form of divine inspiration. The first two are less clear regarding the connection between divine and human speech. Both Elizabeth and, later, Zacharias, are said to be “filled with the Holy Spirit,” and immediately speak.⁶² It may seem that this is spontaneous, and the speakers are not necessarily consciously recalling or even forming words cognitively. We may deduce little from Elizabeth’s case, other than that there is a connection between being filled with the Holy Spirit and speaking prophetic truth. Zacharias’ words, however, are preceded by the descriptive verb “prophesied,” (ἐπροφήτευσεν). Luke records Zacharias’ testimony to what God “spoke by the holy prophets,” and through his use of “prophesy” three verses prior to this, Luke implies that here God is speaking through Zacharias as well.

A more noticeably cognitive example of inspiration occurs in Luke’s account of Simeon in the temple. “And it had been revealed (κεχρηματισμένον)⁶³ to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the anointed of the Lord.”⁶⁴ This brings to mind the way in which the Holy Spirit is said to “teach” the apostles, as discussed earlier, yet apparently without any involvement of Simeon’s memory. Instead, Simeon is said to receive the promise of Christ’s apparition directly from the Holy Spirit. It is thereby that he is able to recognize the

⁶² Lk. 1:41-42; 1:67, respectively.

⁶³ According to Frederick William Danker and Walter Bauer, this usage of *χρηματίζω* points to the “impart[ing] of a divine message,” akin to the revelation of prophesy. “*χρηματίζω*” *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature, Third Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 1089.

⁶⁴ Lk. 2:26.

child he sees in the temple as the Christ. However, it is not clear whence his prophetic words which follow are from, as these do not immediately follow divine intervention, as seemed to be the case in the other two instances. Yet since the knowledge which prompts them is given by divine revelation, it would seem that Luke views his words as at least indirectly spoken by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, we have seen that each of the Gospels presents, in some way, the view that the Holy Spirit speaks through the mouths of men, either spontaneously, or by calling to their remembrance teachings which they have already received. This paves the way for an inspired oral tradition in which the Gospel is not only generated, but recalled through inspiration. The Gospel of Mark's propensity toward oral recitation is evidence for the author's intention that it be handed down orally. If, then, the Gospels—or at least Mark's Gospel—were indeed meant to be transmitted both orally and literarily, and the books themselves cite examples of divine aid toward the memory of what they have recorded, it is possible to conclude that the Gospel writers understood the oral transmission of their works to be a divinely inspired process. Still, evidence in these books alone is insufficient for defining a coherent first-century view of oral tradition. It behooves us, then, to investigate such concepts in the other New Testament books for a clearer picture of the predominant views of the Church in the first century.

The Book of Acts

The Acts of the Apostles, a continuation of the Gospel of Luke, also shows itself to be a work that was meant to be spoken. As Ben Witherington argues in his commentary on the work, Luke's rhetorical style in the text, as in his gospel, is in line with that of many contemporary

Hellenistic authors,⁶⁵ who customarily composed literary works with the intention that they be read aloud. Luke was equipped for the task not only by a thorough knowledge of the subject, but by knowledge of how to present it in a way that would be recalled easily. The *Book of Acts* was written with the intention of its being read aloud.

Oral Tradition as Received and Delivered

We turn now to what the text itself claims with regard to oral tradition. First, *Acts* outlines a pattern of aural reception and oral proclamation of the Word, or words, of the Lord. The apostles repeat the fact that whatever they say, they have already heard from Christ, ““For we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.””⁶⁶ *Acts* contends that the Word originates with Jesus, and is revealed, at times piecemeal, to his apostles, before it is delivered to the multitudes. In the account of his martyrdom, Stephen presents what is the basis for this idea in his description of Moses as one who ““received the living oracles to give to us...””⁶⁷ Two points may be drawn from this. First, Moses is said to receive words from “the angel,” and may therefore be thought of as a vessel through which the Word of God passes to the people. In a later Passage, Peter is also said to be chosen to speak the Gospel, in order that many may hear it and believe.⁶⁸ Indeed, the apostles are commanded throughout the text to proclaim the words of God imparted to them through visions and personal experiences with the Lord.⁶⁹

An image emerges of hearing and proclamation as reception and delivery. “Receive” is

⁶⁵ Witherington cites Polybius as nearest to Luke in purpose and style. Witherington, Ben. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1998, p. 42. Still, this comparison is contended among biblical and Classical scholars.

⁶⁶ Acts 4:20.

⁶⁷ Acts 7:38b.

⁶⁸ Peter is recorded as saying, ““Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe”” (Acts 15:7b).

⁶⁹ Acts 5:20, 10:33, 18:9. We are reminded of Jesus admonition in Matthew 10:27: ““What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops.””

used as a synonym for “accept” where the Word of God is welcomed.⁷⁰ We may compare the usage of ἀποδέχομαι with regard to this Word, which appears in 2:41, 11:1, and 17:11, to those regarding a person or group of people, wherein one receives by welcoming another into his dwelling or fellowship.⁷¹ The same may be said of δέχομαι, found in 8:14, as well as throughout Luke’s Gospel to signify a similar action.⁷²

Moreover, the same concept applies to the sense in which the Word is said to be delivered, or planted, in the hearts of men. We find this in Acts 16:4, where Paul and Timothy “delivered (παρεδίδοσαν) to [the churches] for observance the decisions which had been reached by the apostles and elders who were at Jerusalem.” While it is not explicit in this particular context whether they were written, we see that “the decisions” could not refer to the short letter which was cited in the previous chapter, as the same letter promises that its bearers—here Judas and Silas—“will tell you the same things by word of mouth.”⁷³ It seems, then, that as the regulations mentioned in the letter require further oral explanation, likewise the “decisions” delivered by Paul and Timothy shortly thereafter may well refer to the same oral explanations. Thus, the apostolic doctrine summarized by the letter is detailed in Judas’ and Silas’ oral witness, without hindering its authenticity and consistency with the written letter, and while maintaining its substance as something that may be delivered.

We find a similar usage of παραδίδομι in the prologue to Luke’s Gospel, as mentioned earlier. While Luke sees the value of a written account as opposed to its oral counterpart alone, he implicitly acknowledges the legitimacy of what was handed down orally in his confidence

⁷⁰ The phrases “received the word of God,” or “received the word” (ἀποδεξάμενοι), are used in Acts 8:14, 11:1, 17:11.

⁷¹ Acts 18:27, 21:17, 28:30.

⁷² The emphasis here often seems to be more upon acceptance, or else to care for that person or group in a comparable way to that implied by ἀποδέχομαι. See Luke 9:5,48,53; 10:8,10; 16:4,9; 18:17. It may also mean “to take in hand or in one’s arms,” as in 2:28; 16:6,7.

⁷³ Acts 15:27b.

regarding what he has written. Indeed, he himself was not an eyewitness of the events of Christ's life, but an account of these things were "delivered" to him in a necessarily oral form, yet with the trustworthiness accorded to apostolic witness. By virtue of his possession, albeit second-hand, of the witness, he feels himself able to write an account so sure that having read it, one "may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed."⁷⁴ Rather than discounting oral teaching as unreliable, he seeks to strengthen its veracity and to preserve it by transcribing it into a written document.

The Holy Spirit's Role in Apostolic Speech

Examining now how *Acts* conveys divine involvement in apostolic tradition, we find first that the apostles are commanded to speak as God directs. "Go and stand in the temple," an angel tells the apostles, "and speak to the people all the words of this Life."⁷⁵ In another instance, Paul is instructed to "speak," and not to "be silent."⁷⁶ According to Peter, there is no righteous alternative to proclaiming the Gospel message, "for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."⁷⁷ God has commanded them to speak, and the apostles must obey.

Second, the writer of *Acts* sees the Holy Spirit as himself active in speaking through the apostles. In his account of the Pentecost, Luke narrates the event with the phrase, "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."⁷⁸ The ensuing lines imply that the apostles themselves have given no previous thought to what would be spoken, neither would it seem they have any prior knowledge of the languages in which they were heard speaking. Instead, a visible sign of the divine nature of their

⁷⁴ Lk. 1:4b.

⁷⁵ Acts 5:20.

⁷⁶ Acts 18:9ff.

⁷⁷ Acts 4:20.

⁷⁸ Acts 2:4

words is given in the form of tongues of fire descending directly from Heaven.⁷⁹ It appears that the author intends to persuade the reader of God's direct involvement in human speech, and in this case, in such a way that the insufficiency of the apostles' intellectual faculties is overridden.

Acts 4:31 portrays another unmistakable sign of divine intervention which results in human speech. Luke writes, "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness." It would be difficult to make the case that the author sees the apostles as speaking after their own premeditation and purely according to their own volition. Instead, the pairing of apostolic speech with demonstrations of divine power calls the reader's attention to God's consecration of the testimonies that follow, and to call to mind again the apostolic experience at Pentecost.

Indeed, we find many examples in which even the very words of the apostles, when in accordance with God's command, are confined to the true exposition of their privileged witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ,⁸⁰ the recollection of which, as previously noted, is said in John's Gospel to be aided by the Holy Spirit.⁸¹ We may also recall that Luke's own Gospel attributes to the Holy Spirit the substance of what is spoken in times of trial and opposition.⁸² As in the case of the prophetic voice of the Old Testament, the apostles are forbidden to preach a message which is not from God himself.⁸³ According to Luke, it is not only the power to speak that is given, but also the words which are to be spoken.

Certainly it is evident that the apostles' speech at times is ascribed by Luke to divine

⁷⁹ Acts 2:2-3.

⁸⁰ Cf. Acts 4:20: "for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."

⁸¹ Jn. 14:26.

⁸² Lk. 12:12.

⁸³ The prophet Micaiah provides a parallel in 1 Kings 22:14b: "As the LORD lives, what the LORD says to me, that I will speak."

inspiration. Moreover, such words given by divine utterance, though through human lips, appear to have radical effects. It is upon Peter's authoritative words that Ananias and Sapphira fall dead.⁸⁴ This demonstration of the power in his prophetic word recalls similar events in the lives of the prophets and of Jesus as recorded in the Old Testament and the Gospels, respectively.⁸⁵ The immediacy of the consequences described shows that the very words of the prophets, Christ, and in the case at hand, of the apostles, are believed to be infused with divine authority far beyond human power.

Furthermore, this power is much more often given to be benevolent and even salvific rather than judgmental. This is the case when Peter preaches to Cornelius' household. In the course of his testimony to them, "the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word."⁸⁶ Thereupon their faith is confirmed by the Holy Spirit's presence,⁸⁷ and their conversion made complete through baptism. "And he told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon called Peter; he will declare to you a message (ῥῆμα) by which you will be saved, you and all your household.'"⁸⁸ It is implied that Peter's words are the vehicle for God's grace upon his hearers. Not only here, but elsewhere the reception of the apostolic message, which is necessarily oral in the context of the events described in Acts, is said to

⁸⁴ Following Peter's condemnation of Ananias' deception, we read, "When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died." (Acts 5:5a). Shortly thereafter, Peter tells Ananias' wife, Sapphira, "Hark, the feet of those that have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.' Immediately she fell down at his feet and died." (Acts 5:9b-10a).

⁸⁵ Notable examples include Moses' declaration that Korah and his followers would be swallowed by the earth in Numbers 16:28-33 and Elisha's curse upon a crowd of mocking children in 2 Kings 2:24. In the New Testament, alongside Jesus' various healings by spoken word, we find an analogous curse upon a fig tree: "In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside he went to it, and found nothing on it but leaves only. And he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once." (Mt. 21:18-19; see also Mk. 11:12-14, 20). Jesus also imparts the same power to all believers when questioned about the action (Mt. 21:21-22; Mk. 11:22-24).

⁸⁶ Acts 10:44b.

⁸⁷ Descriptions of the reception of the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of divine acceptance is evident in *Acts*. We see this in the association of the Holy Spirit with conversion, baptism, and faith (2:38, 6:5, 10:47, 19:5-6), and with godly qualities and divine approval (6:3, 9:31, 10:38, 11:24, 15:8).

⁸⁸ Acts 11:13-14.

precede spiritual regeneration. Peter recalls that he was chosen to preach in order that “by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.”⁸⁹ It would seem that divine power is inherent in the words that Peter speaks at God’s command, and are effectual for faith in his hearers.

The apostles are continually said to be recipients of a divine message, which they proclaimed orally and with power to effect salvific faith. Was this same power, however, allotted to its non-apostolic carriers? Does Luke describe the Gospel, once transmitted to others, as a trustworthy message?

Other Preachers of the Gospel

At this stage of the Church’s history, we might not expect a record of notable leaders aside from the Twelve (or Thirteen, once Paul was added to the number). Still, the two examples provided below are sufficient to show that Luke may not have limited inspiration to the apostles’ speech alone.

Very early on, we read that “those who were scattered went about preaching the word (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι τὸν λόγον).”⁹⁰ The fact of the believers’ scattering from Jerusalem is accounted for by Saul’s relentless pursuit of them: “And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church which was in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.”⁹¹ Therefore, “those who were scattered” specifically does not include the apostles, but, as we shall soon see, does refer to preachers of the Gospel message. Again, at this early stage in the Church’s history, we cannot imagine that these believers had written copies of the message they proclaimed. Rather, it seems that the λόγος of which they spoke would have been proclaimed from memory, through divine

⁸⁹ Acts 15:7b.

⁹⁰ Acts 8:4.

⁹¹ Acts 8:1.

inspiration, or both. A similar concept is found in 11:19-21:

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word (λαλοῦντες τὸν λόγον) to none except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also, preaching (εὐαγγελίζω) the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord.

Just as the disciples were scattered about as they preached the word in Luke's Gospel, and saw great miracles done through their verbal commands,⁹² and just as the apostles proclaimed the Gospel in the ways reviewed above, so these anonymous Christians also proclaimed the Gospel, and, by God's blessing, saw powerful effects. No qualifying phrases here differentiate between the divine force through the word of these men and that which empowered the preaching of the apostles. Instead, the last verse signifies that "divine transforming power accompanied their proclamation."⁹³ Just as in the case of the apostles, the words of these men are here not merely a product of human cognition and articulation. They are imparted with God's blessing and yield the fruit of the Holy Spirit, faith, in those who hear.

This is not to deny the apostles' special authority, for Luke again and again refers to them as witnesses to Christ's life, and they are given primacy in the Church.⁹⁴ Yet it would seem from such passages that the "word of God," and the spiritual effects it brings, is not possessed by them alone. How may it be that Luke would have trusted a group of anonymous believers to preach the "word of God," when they likely had few, if any, first-hand experiences with the events of Christ's life, and had no written texts from the apostles who did? We see that the apostles are not the only trustworthy witnesses in Luke's eyes. This is because a greater witness is said to

⁹² Lk. 10:1, 17.

⁹³ Winterington, Ben, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 369. See also Johnson, Luke Timothy and Harrington, Daniel J. *Sacra Pagina: The Acts of the Apostles*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992, p. 203. Note also that Luke uses this same phrase to explain the awe with which people viewed John the Baptist while still a child: "For the hand of the Lord was with him." (Lk. 1:66b).

⁹⁴ Lk. 24:48; Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39-41; 22:14-15; 26:16. For a thorough treatment of the concept of the apostles as eyewitnesses, see Bauckham, Richard, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*.

convey the same testimony in a seemingly extrasensory way. We find an apostolic doctrine of a presumably internal testimony in 5:32: ““And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”” Whether or not the apostles themselves are present, the Holy Spirit is able to attest the faith which they proclaim. By implication, those who have this Witness within themselves—according to the apostles, all believers—may themselves be witnesses to the Christological events.

Such attestation to the Gospel, however, is not by spontaneous generation. As explained above, the apostolic Word is the impetus for belief in the Gospel, and it is only upon hearing this Word that believers are said to be filled with the Holy Spirit, which in turn enables them to be a witness. Yet we see that because of this enabling, those who have heard the Word may be considered trustworthy transmitters of what originated in the mouths of the apostles. This is because the Word itself, while it was given *through* the apostles, is not thought of as being inherently *of* the apostles, but as transcending human boundaries, and as growing even aside from their actions. It is spoken of as an entity that “increased”⁹⁵ and “spread”⁹⁶ well beyond their direct oversight, and well before apostolic texts may have been distributed. The word itself is powerful. Thus, Paul may bid the faithful farewell in good conscience, with this consolation: “I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”⁹⁷ With or without Paul, in oral or literary form, the Word will continue to yield fruit.

Part 3: The Epistles of Paul

We find in Paul’s letters many references to the apostolic teaching handed down to the churches. According to Paul, tradition, παράδοσις, is tantamount to the Christian faith itself,

⁹⁵ Acts 6:7.

⁹⁶ Acts 13:49. See also 10:37.

⁹⁷ Acts 20:32b.

which comes ultimately from the Lord.⁹⁸ What, then, is the meaning of the term in Paul's eyes? How is this tradition handed down, orally or verbally, what does it constitute, and to whom is it entrusted?

Defining “Gospel” and “Tradition” in Paul

Traditions of Men and Traditions of the Lord

In defining Paul's concept of tradition, we first define its origin, and thereby show what is not meant by the term. Just as Christ rejects the “traditions of men” in Mark 7:8, Paul warns his readers in Colossians 2:8, “See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.” Paul here wishes to emphasize the fact that the tradition of the Christian faith is not by men's own devising, for “a tradition initiated by himself or by others is without validity.”⁹⁹ Indeed, Paul stresses the authority of the true tradition, yet beyond that of the apostles, to the extent that “even if we [i.e., the apostles] or an angel from heaven” sought to alter it, the Church ought to cast them off as accursed.¹⁰⁰

Instead, the Church's tradition must come from the Lord Himself. Paul states again and again that the tradition he hands down is not from men, at least not in its origin, but from God. In introducing what many scholars believe must have been a learned saying of Jesus, Paul simply writes, “I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you...”¹⁰¹ Again, he recounts the events of the resurrection in a similar way, saying that he merely “delivered to you as of first

⁹⁸ Büchsel, Friedrich. “παράδοσις,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 2. Kittel, Gerhard, ed. and Bromiley, Geoffrey W., trans. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964, pp. 172-173, p. 172.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Gal. 1:8.

¹⁰¹ 1 Cor. 11:23a. What follows seems to be a paraphrase of the Synoptic tradition (cf. Mt. 26:26-27; Mk. 14:22-24; esp. Lk. 22:19-20). See Bauckham, Ibid., pp. 281-282, and Kim, Seyoon, “Jesus, Sayings of,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993, pp. 474-492, p. 475.

importance what I also received,”¹⁰² although in this case, he does not denote from whom he has received the tradition. Still, this seems to be made evident in a remarkable passage in which Paul repeats that the Lord deigned not to impart the Gospel to him through other apostles, but through direct revelation, a privilege given seemingly to him alone, at least with regard to the particular revelation described here. I quote at length:

“For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel (κατὰ ἄνθρωπον). For I did not receive it from man (παρὰ ἀνθρώπου παρέλαβον αὐτό), nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation (δι' ἀποκαλύψεως) of Jesus Christ.

For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it; and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cili'cia.

And I was still not known by sight to the churches of Christ in Judea; they only heard it said, ‘He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.’¹⁰³

Paul underlines his lack of communication with the other apostles near the beginning of his ministry in such a way that implies that he would not have been able to learn the apostolic sayings and historical accounts of Jesus’ life and resurrection from them. His three years in Arabia and Damascus after his conversion make his subsequent fifteen days with Peter pale in comparison, showing that learning the traditions of Jesus from “flesh and blood” was not his priority. Rather, as in the context of the Galatians’ challenge to his preaching,¹⁰⁴ Paul claims a

¹⁰² 1 Cor. 15:3. Cf. 1 Thess. 2:13: “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”

¹⁰³ Gal. 1:11-23.

¹⁰⁴ The challenge to the validity of Paul’s message stems from a conflict he has had with the Jerusalem apostles. Opponents apparently contended that Paul’s teaching contradicted that of the original apostles, and therefore he has

greater authority than the apostles to be responsible for the ideas he teaches. Evidently, he declares the tradition he passes on to be directly from God. Not even Paul may take credit for it.

The Gospel Defined

What, was the “Gospel” which Paul refers to? Modern scholars have debated the meaning of the term in Pauline usage. Much centers on the singular form of the words over and against the later canonization of four Gospels containing many and varying, at least in a periphrastic sense, sayings of Jesus. What seems to be commonly understood, as Graham Stanton sets forth in *Jesus and Gospel*, is that Paul indeed “insisted that there was *one* Gospel of Jesus Christ...”¹⁰⁵ What was the meaning of this word, and was the “Gospel,” synonymous with “tradition”?

First, Paul’s Gospel is a message about the events and meaning of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. We read in his salutation to the Romans that the Gospel is the prophesy of Christ “promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures,”¹⁰⁶ and thus viewed as in complete continuity with the previously revealed Old Testament tradition.¹⁰⁷ He goes on to describe it as the “Gospel concerning [God’s] Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.”¹⁰⁸ This summary of Christological events seems to be tied into the meaning of the Gospel. In Romans 2:16, Paul’s Gospel includes a testimony to the final judgment, and the Christian hope of Heaven is derived from it in

deviated from the older, and therefore seemingly more authoritative, Gospel. Thus, Paul responds with the affirmation that the source of his tradition (and ultimately, of the Gospel tradition as a whole) is higher than any apostle. See Hays, Richard B. “The Letter to the Galatians,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 11*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000, pp. 181-348, p. 210.

¹⁰⁵ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 39.

¹⁰⁶ Rom. 1:2.

¹⁰⁷ εὐαγγελίζω is also used in the Septuagint in Isaiah 52:7, which Paul quotes in Romans 10:15: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!” Here he appropriates the “good news” of Isaiah, generally interpreted in the context of a Messianic prophesy, to the Christian message.

¹⁰⁸ Rom. 1:3-4.

Colossians 1:5.

However, these things combined are certainly not an exhaustive definition of it. Paul does not write an extensive account of the life of Jesus, but his Gospel as a whole must include much more than these statements. He reminds the Thessalonians that “we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we preached to you the gospel of God.”¹⁰⁹ This implies a much greater length of time than that which proclaiming only the most fundamental concepts would require. Furthermore, he writes to the Romans that he is eager to come again and to “preach the Gospel” to them.¹¹⁰ Presumably they have already heard and believed certain elements of the Gospel, enough that Paul may write that their “faith is proclaimed in all the world.”¹¹¹ Yet some aspect of their faith seems lacking enough that Paul believes further proclamation of the Gospel is necessary.

Paul’s First Epistle to the Thessalonians, moreover, seems to use the term “Gospel” almost interchangeably with “the word,” ὁ λόγος.¹¹² This is certainly a multi-faceted term in New Testament usage, and while its associations with preaching and hearing in 1:5-6 and 2:13, respectively, indicate the spoken word of the apostles and their co-laborers, the breadth of its meaning is not completely lost. As Christ is comprehensive and inexhaustible, and capable of being “at work” among believers, so is “the word” of the Gospel.¹¹³ Far from being encapsulated by a proclamation of doctrine apart from spiritual activity in the process, “the Gospel” seems to be much greater than the sum of doctrinal statements alone. Paul writes that the “gospel is veiled...to those who are perishing,” since “the god of this world has veiled the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of

¹⁰⁹ 1 Thess. 2:9b.

¹¹⁰ Rom 1:13-15.

¹¹¹ Rom 1:8b.

¹¹² Stanton, Graham. *Jesus and Gospel*, pp. 47-48.

¹¹³ 1 Thess. 2:13b.

Christ....”¹¹⁴ The Gospel is given to be ethereal, since the words which, in a sense, comprise it cannot literally be seen as a “light.” Yet this does not eliminate its meaning as a reference to the verbal proclamation of the Gospel, for it is spread by opening one’s mouth¹¹⁵ and by speaking.¹¹⁶ In fact, it cannot have effect unless it is preached.¹¹⁷

To summarize, Paul holds the Gospel to come to its hearers “not only in word,” although outwardly so, as an expressible vehicle for the inexpressible Word, “but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”¹¹⁸

Paul’s Tradition

On the other hand, Paul speaks relatively little and in somewhat different terms regarding apostolic “tradition.” What he does say conveys its conceptualization as a plurality of “traditions” which are both received and delivered,¹¹⁹ similar to Luke’s usage of it in *Acts*, and referred to as a single unit. Indeed, the concept of tradition, παράδοσις, as something which one delivers, παραδίδωμι, is inherent in the Greek terms. It follows, then, that where the latter verb occurs in the text with reference to a set of words which Paul has imparted to a church, we infer it is a “tradition.”

We refer again to 1 Corinthians 11:23-25, in which Paul writes that a tradition which he “received from the Lord,” he *delivered* to the church:

“that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’¹²⁰

¹¹⁴ 2 Cor. 4:3-4ff.

¹¹⁵ Eph. 6:19.

¹¹⁶ Phil. 1:14.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Rom 10:14-17.

¹¹⁸ 1 Thess. 1:5a.

¹¹⁹ Cf. 1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 3:6.

¹²⁰ 1 Cor. 11:23ff-25.

That this particular passage is so similar to the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and especially Luke, has often been noted.¹²¹ Here we see that both the narrative of the events as well as Jesus' words are included in the tradition, and are in harmony with the synoptic traditions. Again, Paul introduces a narrative of the death and resurrection of Christ, also consistent with the Gospels, in the same way: "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received..."¹²² In another instance Paul paraphrases a statement found in Matthew and Luke:¹²³ "the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel."¹²⁴

Christological narratives and sayings are littered throughout Paul's letters, more often implicitly than not, in a way that suggests they were already familiar to the churches to whom he has imparted traditions.¹²⁵ Lee Martin McDonald and Hans Von Campenhausen see in this proof that the sayings of Jesus were already well-known and revered as Scripture among the churches to whom Paul writes.¹²⁶ Also, such a familiarity is implied when Paul introduces a teaching, often a paraphrase of a saying of Jesus, with the question, "Do you not know?"¹²⁷ The implied answer is "Yes," and the application which Paul draws from that previous knowledge would have been built upon it. He is therefore not obliged to repeat these accounts verbatim, but only to refer to them as common knowledge among his readers.

It would follow that Paul's traditions are modeled on the life and testimony about Jesus.

That Paul's theological traditions are, by virtue of the passages alluded to above, "essentially the

¹²¹ See footnote 103.

¹²² 1 Cor. 15:3a, cf. 15:3b-8.

¹²³ Mt. 10:10; Lk. 10:7.

¹²⁴ 1 Cor. 9:14.

¹²⁵ Kim, Seyoon. *Op Cit.*, pp. 475-482.

¹²⁶ "It is clear [from Paul's invocation of the words of Jesus] that the sayings of Jesus had a scriptural status from the very beginning of the Church." McDonald, Lee Martin. *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988, p. 74. That these were, by implication in a Judeo-Christian context, unchangeable, is noted by von Campenhausen: "All the sayings of Jesus known to Paul already have a fixed form and uncontested validity." Von Campenhausen, Hans. *The Formation of the Christian Bible*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1972, p. 112.

¹²⁷ Rom 2:4, 6:3; 1 Cor. 3:16, 5:6, 6 passim., 9:13, 9:24. Paul in fact says that he is addressing his readers with this question because they are familiar with the concept he discusses based on the Old Testament in 7:1 and 11:2.

same” as that of Jesus, has been iterated by a number of scholars.¹²⁸ In addition to words of Jesus and words in continuity with Jesus’ teaching, Paul’s traditions include action, taught through both speech and example, and thus are subsumed in the all-inclusive concept of “the word.” He commends the Corinthians for their imitation of his way of life, and for their maintenance of “the traditions even as I have delivered them to you.”¹²⁹ He goes on to describe the theology behind a woman’s veiling as a tradition which has evidently been heretofore lacking in the church. Paul writes in the same way to the Thessalonians, reminding them of the “tradition which you received from us” through both the apostles’ conduct, which the church was expected to imitate, as well as their command.¹³⁰

Like the Gospel,¹³¹ moreover, an end to these traditions and to the faith which they embody is seemingly unreachable. The passage from 1 Corinthians quoted above, for example, shows that the Corinthian church had kept the traditions they had received in an apparently complete way, yet Paul has something more to impart to them. We are reminded here of his desire to “supply what is lacking” in the faith of the Thessalonians,¹³² and to expound in greater detail upon the Gospel he had previously preached to the Romans.¹³³ As is the case with the Gospel, the traditions of Paul go well beyond basic formulae, and yet they can, like the Gospel, be spoken of in terms of words and actions. The two are intertwined, with the Gospel as the basis for the traditions, and the traditions pointing, in turn, to the Gospel. To put it succinctly, the traditions of Paul are a human expression of a divinely given Gospel,¹³⁴ and therefore the

¹²⁸ Farmer, William. *Jesus and the Gospels: Tradition, Scripture, and Canon*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982, p. 49. Cf. Bultmann, Rudolph. “Jesus and Paul,” in *Existence and Faith*, Ogden, Shubert M., trans. New York, NY: Meridian, 1960, pp. 190-195.

¹²⁹ 1 Corinthians 11:1-2. Quote 11:2b.

¹³⁰ Cf. 2 Thess. 3:6-10.

¹³¹ Cf. Jn. 21:25.

¹³² 1 Thess. 3:10ff.

¹³³ Cf. Rom. 1:9-15.

¹³⁴ Stanton, Graham. Personal Communication, 31 March 2009.

former, as the latter, is both inalterable and inexhaustible, having derived from the same source.

Paul's Oral Tradition

This same tradition is spoken of in oral terms. It is *preached* by the apostles; it is *heard* by believers. Again and again, Paul calls preaching the Gospel his primary purpose, to the extent that he exclaims, “Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel!”¹³⁵ He is entrusted with it so that he may “speak” in 1 Thessalonians 2:4 and 2 Corinthians 2:17, and he praises brothers who boldly “speak the word of God” in Philippians 1:14. He exhorts others to “preach” it as well.¹³⁶ To this end, he asks, “But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?”¹³⁷ Believers are thus considered equipped for the task, even before the existence of a written Gospel,¹³⁸ and, it seems, before his own letter had reached the Roman church. For Paul declares earlier in the same chapter that “the word is near you, on your lips and in your heart,” and if there is any doubt of what Paul means by “the word,” he clarifies, “that is, the word of faith which we preach.”¹³⁹ Paul apparently saw no need for them to refer to a written document. The faith which the apostles preached was ingrained in the hearts of those who had received it.

“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”¹⁴⁰ It is true that “the word” and “the Gospel” are said to be “heard” when is received by faith.¹⁴¹ According to Paul, it seems that hearing and speaking the tradition he has imparted is an integral part of the

¹³⁵ 1 Cor. 9b. Cf. Rom 15:20; 1 Cor. 1:17; 2 Cor. 10:14-15.

¹³⁶ 2 Tim. 4:2. While Pauline authorship is contested, many contemporary scholars, such as J.N.D. Kelly, have defended the authenticity of the pastoral epistles. (*A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1963, pp. 1-34.)

¹³⁷ Rom. 10:14.

¹³⁸ *Romans* was written ca. 55-57 A.D. (Myers, Charles D. “The Epistle to the Romans,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5, pp. 816-830, p. 817.) The first gospel to be written, *Mark*, dates from about 70 A.D. (Achtmeier, Paul J., *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, pp. 541-557, p. 543.)

¹³⁹ Rom. 10:8.

¹⁴⁰ Rom. 10:17. Trans. from the *English Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001.

¹⁴¹ Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:13.

Christian life.¹⁴² At the same time, we ought not to be led into believing that Paul prefers oral testimony to written, as some may suggest. Such would be an odd case for the most prolific author in the New Testament. Besides, his high regard for Scripture proves the contrary.¹⁴³ Instead of showing a preference for one over the other, it is only natural that in an oral culture, reception of the word of God would be thought of in oral and aural terms. Had Paul said “Faith comes from reading,” his words would not have resonated in the same way with a predominantly illiterate congregation, in which even Scripture was read aloud as an oral proclamation.¹⁴⁴ A more accurate perception of his view is that oral and written traditions, if they are indeed apostolic, are alike trustworthy. Paul urges believers to “hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.”¹⁴⁵ There is no separation between the two.¹⁴⁶

Paul as a Transmitter of Divine Revelation

If the Pauline tradition is not of Paul and if, having little contact with the apostles and no firsthand experience with the earthly Jesus, Paul is unable to compose his own tradition from memory alone, what is his role in the transmission process?

Paul frequently refers to the “revelation” or “mystery” miraculously given to him. In his conclusion to his Epistle to the Colossians, Paul alludes to his Gospel, “of which I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his

¹⁴² Aside from the “hearing” passages already mentioned, Paul writes regarding oral confession that “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead,” as though the two were intertwined, “you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9).

¹⁴³ Paul quotes the Old Testament often as “Scripture” or “holy Scripture” (ex. in Rom. 1:2, 4:9, etc.). He summarizes its purpose in Rom. 15:4: “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.”

¹⁴⁴ See footnote 5.

¹⁴⁵ 2 Thess. 2:15b.

¹⁴⁶ G.W.H. Lampe echoes this idea of a coexisting and harmonious “apostolic deposit” in both oral and written forms. (“The Early Church, *Scripture and Tradition*, F.W. Dillistone, ed. London: Lutterworth Press, 1955, p. 42.)

saints. ...”¹⁴⁷ Paul revels in the knowledge that this “word of God” has been imparted to the Church through him, or else through the apostles as a whole.¹⁴⁸ Over and against the fallible wisdom of the world, he writes in his First Epistle to the Corinthians, “We impart a secret and hidden wisdom which God decreed before the ages for our glorification.”¹⁴⁹ He goes on again to inform the church that “we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit....”¹⁵⁰ Again, he emphasizes the divine origin of his teaching, denouncing reliance upon “human wisdom” in the process.

It is of this glorious revelation that Paul sees himself as an emissary to the churches. He reminds the Ephesians of “the stewardship (οἰκονομία) of God’s grace that was given to me for you (τῆς δοθείσης μοι εἰς ὑμᾶς), how the mystery was made known to me by revelation...”¹⁵¹ While Paul defines himself as the original recipient of the revelation he proclaims, and he acts as the caretaker of it, he does not see himself as the author of it, but rather the one through whom God gives his revelation to the Church. Just like the Old Testament prophets, he becomes a mere messenger, the mouth by which God speaks to his people.¹⁵²

Still, to intimate that such a position as messenger requires the elimination of cognizance as contributive to the inspired text, as was the case in the Delphic oracles discussed earlier, would be inaccurate. To say that Paul is an instrument by which God speaks does not exclude

¹⁴⁷ Col. 1:25-26.

¹⁴⁸ Paul alternates between the plural and the singular pronouns. His “notoriously ambiguous use of ‘we’” in the following passage often leaves interpretation open. (Sampley, Paul. “The First Letter to the Corinthians,” *Op.Cit.*, Vol. 11. pp. 770-1003, p. 820.) However, in the case of those who are entrusted with the delivery of divine revelation, it seems that “we” must include no one else beside the apostles, as will be discussed later.

¹⁴⁹ 1 Cor. 2:7b.

¹⁵⁰ 1 Cor. 2:13a.

¹⁵¹ Eph. 3:2b-3a. See also Rom. 16:25-26, where the Lord also is said to use Paul’s “Gospel” as a tool.

¹⁵² See aforementioned passages on p. 9.

Paul's understanding—which itself is a divine gift¹⁵³—from the process of transmission. Rather, Paul seems to devalue the worth of a revelation in which the mind took no part insofar as it is ineffectual for the edification of the recipient's mind.¹⁵⁴ Rather, he exhorts those who speak in tongues, who apparently do receive revelations which cannot be articulated in intelligible words and are therefore alien to the mind, to pray for an understanding of them.¹⁵⁵ In this way, Paul continues, “I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also.”¹⁵⁶

The fact that Paul associates revelation with knowledge of God¹⁵⁷ contrasts with the Greek counterpart of the Pythia, who was unable to interpret her oracles herself. Unlike the case of the Pythia, the revelation Paul receives directly influences his knowledge. Likewise, we may infer that his gift of knowledge was given so that it could be used to further the revealed Gospel. If knowledge is fueled by memory, whether experiential or revelatory, and Paul's knowledge is fueled by divine revelation, then we may conclude that Paul saw the Lord as active in his memory. Just as the Holy Spirit was to “bring to [the apostles'] remembrance” the words of the Lord, so is he said to *create* in Paul's remembrance the traditions he was to pass down.

Revelation to Others than the Apostles

As we have seen, Paul saw himself as entrusted with a revelation which he in turn delivered to the churches. It follows, then, that those who receive it would be thus entrusted with the revelation themselves, at least in a certain sense. According to Paul, since his message is a revelation, all recipients of his message may be said to have access to this revelation. “For he

¹⁵³ What seems to be a gift of intellectual skill beyond the Christological knowledge which would be allotted to every believer is alluded to in 1 Cor. 12:8. Paul refers to himself as gifted with knowledge (but not oratory skill) in 2 Cor. 11:6.

¹⁵⁴ 1 Cor. 14:14.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 14:13.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 14:15.

¹⁵⁷ Paul prays for God to give to the Ephesian Church “a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him...” (Eph. 1:17b).

has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ.”¹⁵⁸

Yet Paul seems also to desire for his readers to receive a revelation directly, although the authority that such revelations held in the Early Church seems unclear. In his Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul prays “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation (ἀποκάλυψις) in the knowledge of him...”¹⁵⁹ The revelation here comes from the Lord Himself, although it is probable that the revelation discussed here is mediated by the apostles. Neither can it be attributed to a wholly separate phenomenon from that which Paul received, for Paul does not here qualify this gift of revelation as different from that which he described in the Galatians passage mentioned earlier. According to James D.G. Dunn, while “revelation” often denotes a conversion experience, “Paul himself enjoyed many other and diverse experiences of revelation throughout his Christian life, and expected that other believers would enjoy similar experiences: experiences in which insights into cosmological and divine realities were given to the believer, and experiences in which particular issues and problems of conduct and daily living were resolved for the believer.”¹⁶⁰ *Ephesians* implies that while Paul was entrusted with a revelation, which in turn was given to the churches, continual revelation, in keeping with that of the apostles, is desirable, even necessary, in the life of the believer.

This point is made more explicit in 1 Corinthians 12, wherein Paul precedes his explanation of spiritual gifts with the phrase “no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁶¹ The Corinthian Church had heard Paul’s message and had likely reiterated his teachings among themselves, yet in Paul’s view even the most basic creedal statement could be

¹⁵⁸ Eph. 1:9.

¹⁵⁹ 1:17.

¹⁶⁰ Dunn, James D.G. *Jesus and Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997, p. 214.

¹⁶¹ 1 Cor. 12:3b.

repeated only through divine aid. If Paul saw divine power as requisite in such a brief articulation of Gospel truth, certainly more lengthy statements, even repetitions of what had been heard previously, would also require divine involvement in revelation. The revelation that “Jesus is Lord,” it would seem, cannot be received from Paul alone; God remains the giver, and Paul the instrument.¹⁶²

In keeping with this idea, later in the same chapter, inspiration seems to be treated as a universal gift to all believers. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is found in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. Herein Paul gives an explanation of “spiritual gifts” and direction for their use in services. In the following passage, Paul implies that each person in the congregation has some particular gift, and each gift is given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit:

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.

All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.¹⁶³

“Utterance (λόγος) of wisdom” and “knowledge” (v. 8), are gifts manifested by words which are inspired, at least in some sense, by God. Dunn calls the latter a “charismatic utterance giving an insight into some fresh understanding of God’s plan of salvation or of the benefits it brings to believers.”¹⁶⁴ Such a gift is akin to that which Paul asks for himself in Ephesians 6:19, in order that he may “proclaim the mystery of the gospel...” It is not supplementary to the Gospel, for Paul asks that it may be given for the proclamation of an already extant Gospel. It

¹⁶² Cf. explanation on pp. 25-27.

¹⁶³ 1 Cor. 12:4-11.

¹⁶⁴ Dunn, *Jesus and Spirit*, p. 220.

seems that Paul desires the gift to be a tool whereby the news of Jesus is effectively preached. It is, moreover, an oral proclamation which Paul describes, for he concludes that he “ought to speak (λαλῆσαι)” in the bold way which the gift enjoys.¹⁶⁵

Prophecy, too, is among the gifts enumerated in 1 Corinthians 12. In the exercise of this gift, it is again apparent that Paul believes that the Holy Spirit is in some way involved in the speech of certain lay prophets, and he describes the evaluation of a given prophecy’s authenticity as by the gift of “distinguishing between spirits.”¹⁶⁶ It is elevated as a gift which aids the Church and which is to be desired above other spiritual gifts, for it is for the edification of the Church.¹⁶⁷ Paul writes in another context that as a gift of the Spirit, prophesying ought not to be “despised” altogether, but each word of the prophet ought to be tested, whether it is truly of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶⁸

Still, as Wayne Grudem explains, the words of the Corinthian prophets are not considered to be God’s words given through them, which we have shown that Paul, along with the Gospel writers, believe is the case with the apostles and the Old Testament prophets.¹⁶⁹ Later in the same chapter, Paul exclaims, “What! Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached?” The implication is that the “word of God” is separate from the words which seem to originate with the prophets, which themselves may be interpretations of the authoritative Gospel. According to Grudem, Paul’s use of “revelation” does not denote the imparting of specific words tantamount to *the* Word, but rather an idea which is expressed in

¹⁶⁵ Eph. 6:20.

¹⁶⁶ This is implicit in 12:10, where Paul places this gift of discernment subsequent to that of prophecy. This same view is repeated in 14:29: “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.” That this is a matter of spiritual testing is evidenced in 14:32: “...and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.”

¹⁶⁷ Cf. 14:1-5.

¹⁶⁸ 1 Thes. 5:19-21.

¹⁶⁹ Grudem, Wayne. *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*. Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers, 2000, pp. 66-67.

human words.¹⁷⁰ Neither does his use of “prophesy” include any expressions like “Thus says the Lord,” “The Lord spoke through the mouth of...” or “The word of the Lord came to...” as we have found is common among other New Testament writers when alluding to the Old Testament.

Instead, the role of these prophets, whose revelations are ongoing and unrecorded, is analogous to that of the visionaries, interpreters of dreams, and Levitical interpreters of the Law discussed in Part Two.¹⁷¹ As the prophets’ words are weighed against the faith already preached by the apostles, whether the new is consistent with the old, Paul seems to view prophesy as a form of interpretation and application of the apostolic message.¹⁷² Therefore, prophesies are held to be valid only insofar as they reaffirm and illuminate the meaning of the Gospel.

Continuous revelation among the churches, then, may be characterized as reception, transmission, and explication of the apostolic tradition.

The Inspired Apostolic Tradition

The revelation articulated by the apostles, on the other hand, is treated with much greater authority than that of the individual prophets. While they indeed are considered “inspired,” their words are not passed down in the form of an oral or written tradition in a way, and were not what the Church eventually came to consider as Scripture.¹⁷³ According to Paul, the words of the

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 64-66.

¹⁷¹ Paul’s entrenchment in Judaic law and custom is evident also on this point: “Paul is an heir of Jewish thought and its highly-trained respect for tradition.” His view of prophetic continuity would therefore not have strayed far from those purported in the Old Testament. Von Campenhausen, Hans., *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, p. 116.

¹⁷² Cf. Rom. 12:6. According to Walter Bauer, this verse instructs New Testament prophets to prophesy “in the right proportion to the faith.” (“ἄναλογία,” *Griechisch-Deutsches Woerterbuch Zu Den Schriften Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Uebrigen Urchristlichen Literatur*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyer, 1988.) Also, as noted before, any teaching which contradicts the apostolic Gospel is condemned in Gal. 1:8-9. See David E. Aune’s *Prophecy in early Christianity and the ancient Mediterranean World*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991, pp. 221-222.

¹⁷³ That the Church already treated the tradition as Scripture, even while unwritten, was discussed earlier, cf. footnote 129. The status of apocryphal books, especially the prophetic *Shepherd of Hermas*, may counter the point that non-apostolic prophesies were also esteemed in a similar way in the second through the fourth centuries, with a canon more or less becoming concrete after 367. Yet if one is to make a generalization, no single books were treated with the same authority as those which were considered to be apostolic, or to contain traditions received directly from apostles. (Metzger, Bruce. *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, passim.)

apostles, whether spoken directly or by the mouth of others who had heard them, were inspired in a unique way which allowed them to be called “the word of the Lord.”¹⁷⁴ These *apostolic* words and the conduct which demonstrated them comprised the authentic traditions which were handed down.

That the tradition originates with the apostles (although ultimately with the Lord) is emphasized by Paul’s attachment of possessive pronouns to it, using phrases like “my gospel,”¹⁷⁵ or “our gospel.”¹⁷⁶ He commands the Thessalonians to “stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us”¹⁷⁷ and to “keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.”¹⁷⁸ In *Galatians*, Paul warns the church against “turning to a different Gospel,”¹⁷⁹ and underlies the primacy of the original Gospel preached by the apostles to the extent that, as shown before in Galatians 1:8, this Gospel is considered more authoritative than the apostles themselves. That Paul believes apostolic traditions have exclusive authority is clear also in 2 Corinthians 11:4, where he rebukes his readers for their willingness to accept “another Jesus than the one we preached” and “a different gospel from the one you accepted [from us].”

Moreover, only the apostles are said to speak “by the word of the Lord.”¹⁸⁰ He writes to the Corinthians that at least some of the commandments he gives are not from himself, but

¹⁷⁴ 1 Thess. 4:15. The same phrase occurs earlier in 1 Thessalonians in reference to words spoken by non-apostolic preachers, yet with the implication that these words are repeated from what was said by the apostles. “For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything” (1:8). The apostles did not need to say anything more because their words had already been spoken by the Thessalonians.

¹⁷⁵ Rom. 2:16, 16:25;

¹⁷⁶ 2 Cor. 4:3; 1 Thess. 1:5; 2 Thess. 2:14.

¹⁷⁷ 2 Thess. 2:15.

¹⁷⁸ 2 Thess. 3:6.

¹⁷⁹ Gal. 1:6b.

¹⁸⁰ 1 Thess. 4:15. 1 Thess. 2:13 is also quite poignant: “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”

directly from the Lord,¹⁸¹ and goes on to make a distinction between wholesome commands from one who “by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy,”¹⁸² and words actually received from God. This would apply also to his idea of universal inspiration. At the end of his direction to the prophets mentioned earlier, he concludes, “If any one thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord.”¹⁸³ In the context, the Holy Spirit is said to inspire prophets. Yet if anyone thinks he is a prophet, it would seem, then he must come under the authority of the apostolic tradition. His own words apparently will bear no weight without the recognition of the *wholly* inspired words of Paul.

The inspired words of the apostles are given primacy in the first-century Church,¹⁸⁴ but their tradition does not remain with them alone. As shown before, while Paul sees the apostles as “entrusted with the Gospel,”¹⁸⁵ he imparts the tradition he has received to the entire body of believers. We have shown also that others were considered to be equipped with the word of God, and all who have received it are thus encouraged to spread it abroad.¹⁸⁶ The Colossians, for instance, are said to have learned the word of God from Epaphras, who speaks on behalf of the apostles,¹⁸⁷ and the Corinthians heard the same message from Silvanus and Timothy.¹⁸⁸ While the apostles may have come first in the line of Gospel transmitters, Paul certainly does not see them as the last.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸¹ 1 Cor. 7:10.

¹⁸² 1 Cor. 7:25.

¹⁸³ 1 Cor. 14:37.

¹⁸⁴ For a more thorough analysis of apostolic authority in oral tradition, see Backham, Richard. *Op Cit.*, *passim*.

¹⁸⁵ Gal. 2:7, 1 Thess. 2:4; cf. 1 Cor. 9:16-17, 1 Tim. 1:11.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Rom. 10:8-17; Phil. 1:5-18.

¹⁸⁷ Col. 1:7.

¹⁸⁸ 2 Cor. 1:19. 1 Corinthians 3:5-6 also shows that Apollos had preached the Gospel to the church as well.

¹⁸⁹ An illustration of this concept is found in Paul’s order within his lists of spiritually gifted leaders: “And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers...” (1 Cor. 12:28). A similar list occurs in Eph. 4:11.

Finally, Paul views the process of Gospel transmission—the speaking of the words of the Lord, whether by apostles or those whom they have taught—as possible only by divine inspiration. While the memories of the speakers are certainly involved in the process, Paul insists that *every* repetition of *every* true statement regarding Christ is in some sense inspired.¹⁹⁰ According to Paul, God is the source of the gifts of knowledge and of revelation, and therefore memory, a function of knowledge, of oral tradition is possible only through his help. This is affirmed by von Campenhausen: “Whenever Paul refers to that which was originally handed down, and which is permanently valid, his primary concern is simply with the fact that by all the external criteria of proof this tradition is assured and trustworthy.”¹⁹¹ Certainly its trustworthiness, however, is not on account of the wisdom or ability of the men which receive it,¹⁹² but on account of the God who enables them to profess what they have received.¹⁹³ It is because of God’s involvement in the process that the early church could trust oral tradition as the accurately preserved words of God.¹⁹⁴

Conclusion

Evangelical scholars need not feel as though their faith in Scriptural inspiration is irreconcilable with historical evidence which shows a lack of universally available New Testament texts among the early Christians. If their faith is indeed in the truth of the New Testament, then the writings of Gospels and of Paul herein analyzed shall assure them that the early Christians saw themselves as entrusted with an oral tradition infused with authority.

¹⁹⁰ 1 Cor. 12:3.

¹⁹¹ *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, p. 116.

¹⁹² 1 Cor. 2:13.

¹⁹³ 2 Tim. 4:17.

¹⁹⁴ “...For I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted [i.e., the Gospel] to me” (2 Tim. 1:12b). In an earlier letter, Timothy is charged with the duty to “guard” the Gospel which has been “entrusted” to him in Paul’s place (1 Tim. 6:20), and again in 2 Timothy: “guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us (2 Tim. 1:14). Timothy is to guard the traditions he has received against perversion, but Paul trusts a higher Source of Gospel truth to preserve it.

In the context of our contemporary literate culture, it may be difficult to imagine a solely or predominantly oral Gospel as something that could be considered as trustworthy as its written counterpart. Yet in an oral culture and a Jewish context in which both texts and unwritten traditions were regularly passed down orally, it was only natural that the first-century church would appropriate both oral and written forms of tradition as reliable vessels through which to spread the word of God. The early Christians were therefore no more audacious to claim absolute authority for oral traditions than they were for written.

In the case of either oral or written traditions, divine inspiration was considered necessary to ensure accuracy in transmission. The word of God could be either spoken or written, but above all, the New Testament writers held that it must come from God and be spoken through his power. God was seen as active in consciousness and memory, and as the provider of the knowledge necessary for Gospel reception and transmission. The repetition of God's word, therefore, whether in speech or in writing, was believed to be an inspired process.

It is by virtue of this same belief that Papias, writing in the early second century, invested his trust in the "instructions I received with care...from the elders, and stored up with care in my memory, assuring you at the same time of their truth. For I did not, like the multitude, take pleasure in those who spoke much, but in those who taught the truth; nor in those who related strange commandments, but in those who rehearsed the commandments given by the Lord to faith."¹⁹⁵ Yet it was these same apostolic traditions which Papias transcribed in his own work, so that, should oral memory someday fail, the Scriptural tradition would remain.

Indeed, by Word and by Spirit, the tradition still continues.

¹⁹⁵ "From The Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord." *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*. Schaff, Philip, trans. Retrieved from Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1 April 2009: www.ccel.org.