

Traditionalism

by John M. Frame

Part 2 of 2: “The Results of Traditionalism” and “The Antidote: *Sola Scriptura*”

The Results of Traditionalism

As one committed heart and soul to the principle *sola Scriptura*, I find the trend toward traditionalism most unfortunate. It has, in my view, weakened the Evangelical witness in our time. Note the following:

1. It has bound the consciences of Christians in areas where Scripture gives freedom. Traditionalists have often insisted, for example, that popular music is entirely and always unfit for use in Christian worship. But where does Scripture say this? What biblical principle implies it? How does this scruple stand up against Paul’s willingness to “become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22)? The argument against the use of “contemporary worship music” is based largely on a historical argument about the genesis of the genre and its incompatibility with certain traditions.¹

2. It has thus led to unnecessary divisions and partisanship among churches and denominations. That displeases our Lord (John 17, 1 Cor. 1-3).

3. Traditionalism has weakened the rational basis of Christian theology insofar as it has replaced exegetical arguments with historical-traditional ones. In Christianity, only Scripture is ultimately authoritative. Arguments based only, or largely, on traditions (either Evangelical or non-Evangelical) will not be persuasive to Christian hearts.

¹ There are also biblical arguments, but rather shallow ones, based on the assumption that contemporary worship music does not emphasize, e.g. the transcendence of God. In my view, emphasis on divine transcendence (holiness, majesty, and power) is one of the strengths of this music. See my *Contemporary Worship Music*.

4. Many traditionalist arguments should be classified as genetic fallacies. For example, we sometimes hear the argument that something is good (e.g. Reformed liturgy) because it comes out of Reformed tradition.² That assumes that everything historically connected with the Reformed tradition is good. So, either the Reformed tradition itself is ultimately normative, or the argument is a fallacy. Or, negatively, we sometimes hear that a song comes from the tradition of pop culture and is therefore unsuitable to Christian worship. This is an antithetical argument, as the former was an argument from identification. It is valid only on the assumption that there is nothing at all that is good in pop culture, an assumption impossible to prove and unlikely on a biblical view of common grace. It is hard for me to avoid the impression that traditionalism accounts for much of the poor quality of thought and argumentation one finds in evangelical writings today.³

5. The traditionalist-historicist argument that the church must be completely separate from modern culture is hard to square with the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. The biblical stance of Christians is not to hide from the world, but to go forth and win the world for Christ. We are not to be “of” the world, but we are to be “in” it. And, to carry out the evangelistic mandate, we are to become like the world, like the prevailing culture, in some ways. Paul says, “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22).⁴

This raises the issue of communication, for as Christ’s ambassadors, we must proclaim the gospel in the languages of the world. The movement

² This sort of thing is even worse, of course, when an idea is adopted because it “sounds” Reformed and another is rejected because it “sounds” Arminian. I have often encountered this kind of sloppy thinking among theological students.

³ I speak, to be sure, as one who has been burned by reviewers who have attacked my writings without any meaningful argument, merely because I disagreed with traditions with which the reviewers identified. See, for example, the exchange between Mark Karlberg and myself concerning my *Cornelius Van Til* in *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 9:2 (Fall, 1993), 279-308.

⁴ The argument that we must avoid any contamination of contemporary culture in our means of proclaiming the gospel seems to me also to be at odds with the exhortation of Abraham Kuyper to bring all of culture under the dominion of Christ. (Cf. Paul in 2 Cor. 10:5). Some aspects of culture — its immorality and selfishness — should be avoided. Scripture tells us what to avoid. But for the most part Scripture calls us to conquer, not to hide.

toward contemporary worship music is essentially an attempt to speak the musical language that many people are speaking today. The traditionalist would forbid this and require us to use antiquarian music. But has he considered adequately Paul's emphasis on intelligible communication in worship (1 Cor. 14)?

6. There are distressing signs that some are seeking to *define* the Evangelical and Reformed movements in traditionalist ways. I have called attention to this danger in the "Cambridge Declaration" of the Association of Confessing Evangelicals.⁵ I have also heard recently of a conference sponsored by that organization in which one speaker made a scathing attack on contemporary forms of worship and worship music. These issues, to be sure, are complex, and I certainly do not insist that all Evangelicals agree with me. I have explored this issue in a book-length discussion,⁶ and I freely admit that there is far more to be said. I am happy to see these matters freely and vigorously discussed. However, I wish that ACE would see the value of presenting more than one view of these matters when, after all, they are not actually resolved by the confessions themselves.

This is a time of definition for Evangelicals, especially for those who, like myself, genuinely wish to be known as "confessional." And I fear that the message people are hearing in the ACE writings and conferences is that those who are motivated by the Great Commission to speak in God's praise the languages of our time are not fit to bear the name of Evangelical. That suggestion, I think, is unhistorical, divisive, and untrue.

7. The same is true of the specifically Reformed confessional group in North America. The adoption of women's ordination by the Christian Reformed Church has led to much rethinking of what it means to be Reformed.⁷ Among those who have taken a biblical position on scriptural inerrancy and the roles of men and women, *Outlook* magazine has a unique ministry. The *Outlook* provides not only news, but also biblical, doctrinal, and practical studies which inevitably serve to define the

⁵ In my "Biblicism" paper, cited above.

⁶ *Contemporary Worship Music*.

⁷ My own view is that the problems in the Christian Reformed Church arose in part because of confusion in that body over the distinction between traditionalism and *sola Scriptura*. The denomination has tended to see itself more as the heir of the Reformation and the daughter of the Dutch Gereformeerde tradition, than as a body determined to continual reformation according to the Word of God.

emerging nature of the orthodox Reformed community in North America. It has properly emphasized biblical authority and Reformed confessional orthodoxy.

But the *Outlook's* view of worship has been, in my opinion, governed more by traditionalism than by serious biblical exegesis. It has featured articles by Mark Beach⁸ and a defense of the exclusive use of Psalm versions in worship by Robert Godfrey. More recently, the *Outlook's* editor has asked Darryl Hart and John Muether to write what would appear to be the magazine's definitive series of articles on the subject of worship. I have referred to Hart's views in a footnote to this paper. He clearly fits my definition of a traditionalist,⁹ and he carries traditionalism to something of an extreme.

I am not opposed to Hart and Meuther speaking their piece and being published in the *Outlook*. I do object to the fact that they (together with Beach and Godfrey) are presented without any alternative view or rebuttal.

Again, the impression we receive is that it is unorthodox to worship in contemporary ways, and that indeed it is just as important to maintain Reformed liturgical traditions as it is to believe in predestination. Again, this suggestion is false and divisive. The conservative Reformed movement should rather be reaching out at this time to all who embrace the sovereign Lord of Scripture. And in my view it desperately needs the help of those who are seeking to reach beyond the Reformed community, beyond those for whom Reformed traditions have meaning, to bring to them the whole gospel of God.

The Antidote: *Sola Scriptura*

In this situation, the Reformation (traditional!!) principle of *sola Scriptura*, the sufficiency of Scripture, needs to be heard anew. Scripture itself proclaims it:

⁸ I have criticized Beach's rather extreme positions in *Contemporary Worship Music*.

⁹ I have sometimes worried that my descriptions of traditionalism might be thought by some to be caricatures. Hart's position, however, goes beyond anything I have ever charged traditionalists with saying.

Do not add to what I command you, and do not subtract from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I give you (Deut. 4:2; cf. Deut. 12:32; Josh. 1:7; Prov. 30:6; Rev. 22:18-19).

These people draw near me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men (Isa. 29:13; Jesus quotes this passage against Pharisaic traditionalists in Matt. 15:8-9).

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Scripture does not, of course, tell us everything we need to know about everything. We must look outside Scripture if we want specific directions on how to fix a sink or repair a car. But Scripture tells us everything that God wants us to know “concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.6). Scripture doesn’t tell us how to repair a car, but it tells us how to glorify God in repairing a car, namely by doing whatever we do “in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17), and by working at it with all our hearts “as working for the Lord, not for men” (Col. 3:23).

Even in worship there are some things that cannot be derived from Scripture, “some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be obeyed” (*Westminster Confession*, 1.6). So there is room for tradition. But Scripture and Scripture alone has the final word. Nothing outside Scripture may be imposed as law on God’s people. No mere historical argument, no critique of culture, no human tradition, not even a church confession, can be ultimate law in God’s Church.

Some would argue that the church preceded Scripture. In one sense this is true. From Adam to Moses, there is no clear record of any written revelation. But when God gives his written word to Israel, that word stands as His written covenant with them, the written constitution of the people of

God. That covenant document is to be the highest authority for God's people, the word of the living God Himself. Thus the people are not to add or subtract; they are not to turn to the right or to the left. Open any page in Deuteronomy at random, and you are likely to find admonitions to obey all the commands, statutes, testimonies, words, judgments, etc. in God's law, the written law.

The New Covenant in Jesus is also subject to God's written word (2 Tim. 3:16-17, again). No human wisdom must be allowed to take precedence over Scripture, either to allow what Scripture forbids, or to forbid what Scripture allows.

So when questions arise concerning worship, we must ask first of all, what does Scripture command? What are the things Scripture requires? What are the areas in which Scripture gives us freedom to make decisions within the bounds of its general principles?

Where we have freedom to make our own choices (as, I believe, concerning music style), we still have to evaluate the possibilities. Are there contemporary styles of music that are incompatible with biblical norms for worship? I think there are. But if someone wants to argue that a particular style is incompatible with Scripture, he will need to show that he has carefully understood what the biblical principles are, and not just rely on genetic-fallacy historical arguments or arguments which assume that tradition should never be changed. And he will need to do justice to *all* the relevant biblical principles: not just the transcendence and holiness of God, but also the Great Commission and the importance of edifying worshippers.

Sola Scriptura, therefore, forbids us to absolutize tradition or to put the conclusions of historical scholarship on the same level as Scripture. As such, it is a charter of freedom for the Christian, though, to be sure, Scripture restricts our freedom in a number of ways. Jesus' yoke is easy, and as we take that yoke upon us, we lose the tyrannical yokes of those who would impose their traditions as law. May God enable us to understand and celebrate his gentle bonds and his wonderful liberty.