

The Early Church Fathers on Tradition

The Early Church regarded oral tradition (as taught by the Church) to be equal in authority with written tradition (Scripture) because they both came from the same God through the same Church. As Paul tells us: "hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). And why would Paul want us to hold fast to the Church's oral traditions? He gives us the answer in 1 Thessalonians 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..."

Papias

Whenever anyone came my way, who had been a follower of my seniors, I would ask for the accounts of our seniors: What did Andrew or Peter say? Or Phillip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any of the Lord's disciples? I also asked: What did Aristion and John the Presbyter, disciples of the Lord say. For, as I see it, it is not so much from books as from the living and permanent voice that I must draw profit (The Sayings of the Lord [between A.D. 115 and 140] as recorded by Eusebius, *Church History*, 3:39 [A.D. 325]).

Irenaeus

For even creation reveals Him who formed it, and the very work made suggests Him who made it, and the world manifests Him who ordered it. The Universal [Catholic] Church, moreover, through the whole world, has received this tradition from the Apostles (*Against Heresies* 2:9 [A.D. 189]).

Tertullian

For wherever both the true Christian rule and faith shall be shown to be, there will be the true Scriptures, and the true expositions, of all the true Christian traditions (*The Prescription Against Heretics* 19 [A.D. 200]).

Origen

Seeing there are many who think they hold the opinions of Christ, and yet some of these think differently from their predecessors, yet as the teaching of the Church, transmitted in orderly succession from the Apostles, and remaining in the churches to the present day, is still preserved, that alone is to be accepted as truth which differs in no respect from ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition (*On First Principles* Bk. 1 Preface 2 [circa A.D. 225]).

Athanasius

What then I have learned myself, and have heard men of judgment say, I have written in few words; but do you, remaining on the foundation of the Apostles, and holding fast the traditions of the Fathers, pray that now at length all strife and rivalry may cease, and the futile questions of the heretics may be condemned (*De Synodis* 3:54 [A.D. 359]).

Eusebius

While [Ignatius of Antioch] was making the journey through Asia under the strictest military guard, he strengthened the diocese in each city where he stayed by spoken sermons and exhortations, and he especially exhorted them above all to be on their guard against the heresies which then for the first time were prevalent and he urged them to hold fast to the tradition of the Apostles to which he thought it necessary, for securities sake, to give form by written testimony (*Church History*, 3:36 [A.D. 325]).

Basil

Of the beliefs and practices whether generally accepted or publicly enjoined which are preserved in the Church some we possess derived from written teaching; others we have received delivered to us "in mystery" by the tradition of the Apostles; and both of these in relation to true religion have the same force. And these no one will contradict; - no one, at all events, who is even moderately versed in the institutions of the Church. For were we to attempt to reject such customs as have no written authority, on the ground that the importance they possess is small, we should unintentionally injure the Gospel in these matters... (*On the Holy Spirit* 27 [A.D. 375]).

Jerome

Don't you know that the laying on of hands after baptism and then the invocation of the Holy Spirit is a custom of the Churches? Do you demand Scripture proof? You may find it in the Acts of the Apostles. And even if it did not rest on the authority of Scripture the consensus of the whole world in this respect would have the force of a command. For many other observances of the Churches, which are due to tradition, have acquired the authority of the written law (*The Dialogue Against the Luciferians* 8 [A.D. 382]).

John Chrysostom

"So, then brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word, or by epistle of ours" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). Hence it is manifest, that they did not deliver all things by epistle, but many things also unwritten, and in like manner both the one and the other are worthy of credit. Therefore, let us think the tradition of the Church also worthy of credit. It is a tradition, seek no farther (*Homilies on 2 Thessalonians* [circa A.D. 400]).

Vincent of Lerins

I have often then inquired earnestly and attentively of very many men eminent for sanctity and learning, how and by what sure and so to speak universal rule I may be able to distinguish the truth of Catholic faith from the falsehood of heretical pravity; and I have always, and in almost every instance, received an answer to this effect: That whether I or anyone else should wish to detect the frauds and avoid the snares of heretics as they rise, and to continue sound and complete in the Catholic faith, we must, the Lord helping, fortify our own belief in two ways: first, by the authority of the Divine Law, and then, by the Tradition of the Catholic Church (*Commonitory* 2 [A.D. 434]).

Theodoret

I have ever kept the faith of the Apostles undefiled... So have I learnt not only from the Apostles and the Prophets but also from the interpreters of their writings, Ignatius, Eustathius, Athanasius, Basil, Gregory, John, and the rest of the lights of the world; and before these from the holy Fathers in council at Nicaea, whose confession of the faith I preserve in its integrity, like an ancestral inheritance [styling corrupt and enemies of the truth all who dare to transgress its decrees] (Letters no. 89 [circa A.D. 443]).

Augustine

But in regard to those observances which we carefully attend and which the whole world keeps, and which derive not from Scripture but from Tradition, we are given to understand that they are recommended and ordained to be kept, either by the apostles themselves or by plenary [ecumenical] councils, the authority of which is quite vital in the Church (Letter 54:1 [A.D. 400]).

John Damascene

So, then, in expectation of His coming we worship towards the East. But this tradition of the apostles is unwritten. For much that has been handed down to us by tradition is unwritten (*Exposition of the Faith* 3:12 [A.D. 712]).