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The Authority of Tradition in the Work of Nigel G. Wright

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Introduction

This article examines the role of tradition in the theology of Nigel G. Wright. There are several reasons that Wright's work deserves greater attention by the wider church than it has hitherto received, particularly as it relates to congregational theological discernment.

First, he held a position of enormous personal influence in the UK's fifth largest denomination¹ as Principal of Spurgeon's College, Baptist Union President, author, speaker, and prominent voice in the charismatic renewal of mainstream denominations.² Second, his work is intentionally pitched at bridging the gap between the academy and the local Church. In his systematic account of the Baptist vision of the church, *Free Church, Free State*, he explains that his 'declared goal is to shape the way Baptist Christians live out their lives today and in the future, and to offer an interpretation of Baptist identity for the generations to come'.³ In that sense he was self-consciously writing to equip Free Churches to govern themselves in a way that is both theologically coherent and faithful to their own values.

Finally, the Baptist, or Free, conception of the church is already more significant than is often credited. Wright himself notes the many different tribes within Christianity (such as Pentecostals, New

¹ The BUGB claims 1,875 churches and close to 100,000 members: *Baptist World Alliance* < <https://www.baptistworld.org/member/baptist-union-of-great-britain/> > [accessed 20 July 2023].

² See, for example, Ian M Randall, 'Part of a Movement: Nigel Wright and Baptist life', in *Challenging to Change* edited by Pieter J. Lalleman (London: Spurgeon's College, 2009), 143-62.

³ Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), xvi.

Churches, etc) which ‘while not being denominationally Baptist, stem from the radical wing of the Reformation, and whatever the other differences, nonetheless broadly shares some or all of those values associated with believers’ baptism, the autonomy of the local congregation and freedom of conscience’.⁴ To this observation might be added the increasing trend in other denominations towards congregational autonomy and away from centralised ecclesial control (which we have seen in Anglicanism and even Roman Catholicism in recent years).⁵ Baptist or Free Church ecclesiology might offer a glimpse of the promise and problems inherent in those trends.

This article will first consider Wright’s view of the autonomy of the local congregation and his understanding of the role of tradition in limiting that autonomy. It will be argued that Wright views the local congregation as competent and free to determine its own doctrine and practise through its engagement with scripture without any formal external restraint. However, there are also certain exegetical moves and theological conclusions that Wright believes are not legitimately open to a Baptist Church. What is missing is an explanation of (a) how these constraints arise in the absence of any binding authority external to the congregation itself; or (b) how a local congregation can determine whether the question before it is one it has freedom to address without limitation or not. Both points need to be addressed to make the rest of Wright’s model of congregational autonomy coherent and practically workable.

The difficulties with Wright’s position will then be analysed before a solution is proposed. It will be argued that Wright’s emphasis on the pneumatological underpinnings of the church, and the role he argues for the Spirit in leading local congregations, provide the tools needed

⁴ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, xxiii.

⁵ In the US context, the term “Baptistification” was coined by Martin E. Marty to describe this phenomenon in his 1983 article, ‘Baptistification Takes Over’, *Christianity Today* (September, 1983), 33-36. More recent observers have noted that the trend has accelerated since Marty’s original work: Russell Moore, ‘We Are All Baptists Now’, *Christianity Today* 65.7 (October, 2021), 26. Wright noted that a similar trend had begun in Britain by the early 1990s, although he did not refer to Marty’s argument or use his labels: Nigel G. Wright, *Challenge to Change: A Radical Agenda for Baptists* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991), 96.

to construct a doctrine of tradition that is both consistent with the principal themes of Wright's thought and brings those themes a greater coherence. Finally, some practical implications for the way that local Free Churches govern themselves and take decisions will be suggested.⁶

Tradition, Scripture and the Autonomy of the Local Church

Throughout his work Wright is concerned to summarise and authentically present historic Baptist and Free conceptions of the relationship between scripture, tradition and autonomy in the life of the local church. In the following section, six propositions are identified that illustrate Wright's thought in these areas.

First, 'the authentic form of the church's life' is as a 'freely-choosing and disciplined community'.⁷ In turn this implies that the local church or congregation is autonomous. The authority to interpret scripture and to determine what Christ requires of that particular community ultimately lies with local congregations, who exercise it free from formal external constraints.

Thus, Wright argues that 'believers together have a God-given competence to discern the way of Christ for their congregation and that free congregations cannot be compelled into conformity in matters by denominational groups or representatives'.⁸

This flows from the conviction 'that freedom in Christ is of the essence of Baptist identity: freedom from state control, freedom from ecclesiastical domination, freedom of religious expression and of the

⁶ Throughout, capitalised references to a Church, Baptist Church or Free Church are to a particular congregation or to the Baptist or Free Churches more generally. References to the wider universal church are uncapitalised.

⁷ Nigel G. Wright, *Disavowing Constantine: Mission, Church and the Social Order in the Theologies of John Howard Yoder and Jürgen Moltmann* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 180.

⁸ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 42-3.

informed conscience and yet always freedom within constraints, freedom in Christ, by Christ and for Christ, freedom and faithfulness'.⁹

The local Church is therefore 'competent to govern its affairs by discerning the mind of Christ. In this sense, each congregation is empowered to do what is necessary for its own life.'¹⁰

Second, scripture is the supreme rule for the church in both its doctrine and practice.

The Scriptures have supreme authority for all matters of faith and conduct including church order. Of course, authority properly belongs to God and to Christ but is mediated by the Spirit through the primary and inescapable authority of Scripture.¹¹

Together with much of classical Protestantism, therefore, Wright affirms the supreme authority of scripture. This authority is derived from the Bible's origins in the Spirit and itself justifies the primary place given to scripture in Baptist exegesis and practise.

In this sense, Baptists are, Wright argues, committed to a form of 'primitivism' or 'restorationism.' This is not, however, 'a legalistic attempt to reproduce the church of the first century but a free search for authoritative guidance and inspiration for responsible decisions the church must make in whatever time and culture it finds itself.'¹²

Third, however, scripture has to be interpreted. This complicates the question of its application within the local congregation and in the church more broadly.

While the text of scripture should be primary for Baptist or Free Churches, Wright concedes that:

⁹ Nigel G. Wright 'Sustaining Evangelical Identity: Faithfulness and Freedom in Denominational Life', in *Truth that Never Dies: The Dr. G. R. Beasley-Murray Memorial Lectures* edited by Nigel G. Wright (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2015), 203-221 [220].

¹⁰ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 116-7.

¹¹ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 42.

¹² Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 42.

even those who agree concerning a doctrine of Scripture might diverge widely over the material nature of its authority and what it actually teaches on any given topic, and even more about the significance of that teaching for the world of today. Believing in the Bible turns out to be more complex than might at first be imagined.¹³

For that reason, he accepts the inevitability and desirability of ‘lesser authorities . . . shaping the way [Scripture] is understood and applied’.¹⁴

Fourth, tradition is part of the inescapable context within which we read scripture. Wright acknowledges that ‘Scripture is never “alone.” Other forces shape our understanding’.¹⁵ Therefore,

Whenever present-day Christians take a Bible in their hands, sing a hymn, or recite the creed in worship, they are implicitly acknowledging the ways in which they are dependent on previous generations who handed the faith on to them in the first place. None of us invents the conversation as though from the beginning: we insert ourselves into one that has long preceded us.¹⁶

To some extent this observation is just a concession of reality: all reading happens in a context and all readers are shaped by that context. This context imposes an obligation to ‘listen with humility to the wisdom of our mothers and fathers in the faith.’¹⁷

Fifth, Wright posits that there are minimal doctrinal beliefs that are necessary for a congregation to be considered a part of the church and as preconditions for doing Christian theology. For example, Wright argues that, however strong one’s commitment to the principle of *semper reformanda*, ‘Christianity cannot be subject to limitless redefinition

¹³ Nigel G. Wright, *The Radical Evangelical: Seeking a Place to Stand* (London: SPCK, 1996), 44.

¹⁴ Wright, *Radical Evangelical*, 27.

¹⁵ Wright, *Radical Evangelical*, 46.

¹⁶ Nigel G. Wright, *Vital Truth: The Convictions of the Christian Community* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 6.

¹⁷ Wright, *Vital Truth*, 6.

without ceasing to be itself.¹⁸ He summarises this perspective by using the Reformation formula of ‘the right proclamation of the Word of God and the administration of the sacraments’ as the ecclesial minimum while adding the idea of ‘a covenanted community of disciples’.¹⁹

This necessarily raises the question of what readings of scripture, and what systematic theological conclusions drawn from those readings, are *a priori* binding on otherwise autonomous Churches and why. It is here that Wright’s theological formulations begin to become less specific and consistent.

Sixth, ecumenical tradition binds the local Church, except when it doesn’t. Throughout his writing, Wright has maintained a strong commitment to classical trinitarianism and to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in particular. Thus, for example, he argues that ‘the fundamental, defining paradigm by which we interpret Christianity is the trinitarian doctrine of God. Where God is sincerely confessed as Father, Son and Spirit we find the apostolic faith and fellow believers’.²⁰ Later in the same work, Wright goes further:

The primary debate in the Church of today is not between evangelicals and non-evangelicals but between those who hold fast to the trinitarian core of Christian faith and those who wish to depart from it.²¹

In *Free Church, Free State*, Wright clarifies this point. In his view Nicene Christology is a minimal requirement for church life.

Jesus’ teaching about two or three gathering in his name . . . means to do so intentionally and because of some quality of belief in him and devotion to him. These in their turn cannot be separated from the content of that belief, the doctrine of

¹⁸ Wright, *Radical Evangelical*, 13.

¹⁹ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 19.

²⁰ Wright, *Radical Evangelical*, 13.

²¹ Wright, *Radical Evangelical*, 27.

Christ which underlies them and must be in accord with the apostolic testimony.²²

The definitive decisions over the essence of Christian belief about God were made at a series of ‘ecumenical councils’ in the first centuries of the church’s life when the church remained relatively undivided.²³

For Wright, therefore, a Free Church congregation cannot reject the orthodox doctrine of Christ and still be considered a legitimate part of the universal church or part of the Baptist tradition.²⁴ As Wright explains, ‘[t]he authority of the congregation today is also circumscribed by the authority of Scripture and the content of the faith that has been handed down to it’.²⁵

While that part of the tradition cannot be rejected or reformed by a local congregation, other elements, in Wright’s view, can. Wright explains that:

Tradition is essentially good. But aberration is always a possibility and individual traditions need to be tested against their point of origin to see whether they are a legitimate unfolding of the apostolic witness or illegitimate deviations from it.²⁶

Among Protestants this is unlikely, on its face, to be a controversial proposition. Even among Roman Catholics there is recognition that engagement with tradition needs to be critical and open to correction.²⁷ The questions it immediately poses are familiar ones, however: Why are any particular readings of scripture (and consequent

²² Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 19.

²³ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 192.

²⁴ Wright, *Free Church Free State*, 39-40; Wright, *Vital Truth*, 6-7.

²⁵ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 130.

²⁶ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 1-2.

²⁷ See, for example, Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition* (New York, NY: Hawthorn, 1964), 44-46, 64-66.

dogmatic formulations) binding on congregations? If we grant that some are (and some are not), how do we tell which is which and why?

These are serious issues for any ecclesiology. However, because Baptist and Free Church theologians emphasise the responsibility of the local congregation to determine its own readings of scripture, and govern its own life, they are even more significant. The implications of our responses to these questions are deeply practical, affecting everything from the practice of the sacraments to ethical judgments and ecumenical/interfaith relationships.

Summary of the Problem and Its Implications

The great virtue of Wright's articulation of Baptist thought is its clarity and conviction. He explains the attractive qualities of a Free Church ecclesiology unapologetically and compellingly. However, he also lays bare its internal difficulties.

We are offered a vision of the church in which the local congregation is free to interpret scripture without constraint by external authorities. Yet that freedom is not absolute. It is limited in some sense by the existing content of the Christian faith (what we might describe as orthodoxy).

Wright's position must surely be correct. The radical *sola scriptura* tendencies within the Free Church world notwithstanding, there must be a limit to the acceptable ways a local church can interpret scripture if it is to be considered a part of the Christian church (and not, for example, Muslim, Mormon or Unitarian). After all, as Wright himself notes, 'The Christian community exists because of certain convictions that both define and motivate it'.²⁸ In turn this implies (a) that there is a form of authority binding the local church but external to it; and (b) that authority cannot itself derive from the local congregation's reading of scripture.²⁹

²⁸ Wright, *Vital Truth*, 9.

²⁹ Wright himself notes the tradition represents its own constraint on the local Church, *Free Church, Free State*, 130.

In other words, there must be some form of binding authority outside the local Church that defines the scope of its authority to read scripture and to delineate the outer limits of acceptable interpretation. Wright's work implicitly acknowledges all of this. Yet it does not help the practical theologian, or local congregation, to understand (a) how this authority arises; (b) how its content can be discerned; or (c) why it binds the congregation in the absence of an external ecclesial authority.

The explanation for some of this confusion lies in Baptist history itself. As Wright states, 'it helps to see that [the Baptist vision of the church] was above all a reaction against the institutional church which had over a period of centuries become an immensely powerful and domineering institution'.³⁰

Baptist life, in Wright's conception, is rooted in dissent. That is, it takes what is already assumed (what other councils, theologians and ecclesial bodies have defined and argued for such as the ecumenical creeds, Christian ethics etc) and then points out certain flaws (such as an abuse of power, undue hierarchies, nominalism etc). This is an important task. Baptists and other Free Churches have contributed a huge amount to the global church, most notably in their commitment both to mission and equipping and discipling ordinary Christians and in their challenging other denominations to do the same. Indeed, Wright goes further, arguing that Western commitments to freedom of religion (and of conscience more broadly) are, at least in part, developments of the logic of Free Churches.³¹

Like all revolutionary or reforming movements, however, an ecclesiology rooted in dissent, and in particular in dissenting from existing structures of authority, encounters some significant problems. Chief among them is that at some point one has to explain why certain Christian readings of scripture that were accepted before the reform movement began (such as a Nicene Christology) should continue to be so in the absence of the structures that first adopted and sustained them. Unless that problem can be solved it will eventually undermine

³⁰ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, xviii.

³¹ For example, Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 207-10.

all assertions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy and, in so doing, destroy the coherence and integrity of the movement's claim to being a part of the historic Christian church at all.

Moreover, this is corrosive for confidence in Christian doctrine, for any given interpretation of scripture, and ultimately for mission. As Wright comments in the opening pages of *Vital Truth*, 'the church is in the business of converting men and women to Christ; but an unconvinced church will be an unconvincing church, unable to bring anybody to the point of decision'.³² Or alternatively, in his reflections on the 1970s Christological controversy in the Baptist Union of Great Britain, '[n]o denomination can exist without a degree of latitude and tolerance in the views that its members may hold. But a movement that has no limits to what can be deemed acceptable is in danger of losing its identity and bringing about its own dissolution'.³³

Wright himself does not explicitly address these questions (beyond the observation that it is impossible to escape our contexts entirely). We can, however, begin to use the ecclesiological concepts he does outline to develop an account of tradition that is consistent with his thought and yet of greater practical help to practitioners and congregations.

In particular, Wright's emphasis on the pneumatological underpinnings of the church, and the way the congregation takes decisions, offer the possibility of a third way between the *sola scriptura* reading associated with radical Protestant movements and reliance upon formal structures of ecclesial authority as guarantors and enforcers of orthodoxy. In the remainder of this article we will consider how such a model might arise, and how it relates in practice to the local Church's decision making and external relationships.

Pneumatological Ecclesiology

Throughout his work Wright has consistently affirmed the centrality of the Holy Spirit in constituting and guiding the church. He holds that the church is, at its core, a pneumatological phenomenon. Thus, for

³² Wright, *Vital Truth*, 4.

³³ Wright, 'Sustaining Evangelical Identity', 208.

example, in his PhD thesis, later published as *Disavowing Constantine*, Wright asserts that it is the Spirit who enables believers to participate 'in the fellowship and mission of the Triune God'. Moreover, it is the Spirit by whom 'believers are drawn into the communion of God's own being.' The church is therefore 'a confessing or believers' church constituted by the Spirit from those gathered into communion'.³⁴

Moreover, the Spirit continues to lead and speak to the church as she seeks to live out her calling. In Wright's evangelical Baptist theology, therefore, the local Church meeting by which Baptist or Free Churches govern themselves in the absence of the episcopacy or some other trans-local authority structure are best understood as opportunities for discerning the will of the Spirit.

Thus, in *Challenge to Change*, Wright expresses the role of the Church meeting in this way:

It is not the intention of church meetings to find out what the majority want and give it to them. We are concerned with 'the guidance of the Holy Spirit', 'the judgments of God' and 'the mind of Christ'. The question becomes for church meetings 'What does God want?' rather than 'What do we want?'³⁵

Viewed in this way, congregational meetings to determine Free Church doctrine or practice are best understood as listening exercises in which the congregation seeks to hear what the Spirit is saying (either through scripture or one another). Moreover, it is the same Spirit speaking to each congregation, wherever and whenever they are located. Each congregation throughout Christian history is fundamentally engaged in the same exercise: listening for instruction from the one Spirit who interprets the scriptures he inspired and applies them to a particular context.³⁶

³⁴ Wright, *Disavowing Constantine*, 180.

³⁵ Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 102.

³⁶ Wright, *Vital Truth*, 128. The use of masculine pronouns for the Holy Spirit has become contested. The rest of this article will follow Wright's own usage: for example,

In that sense, the local Church is autonomous only in the limited sense of freedom from human hierarchy; it remains under the rule of the same Spirit, discerning his mind and bound, in theory at least, to carry out his instruction. It is not an independent democracy but a theocracy. As Wright explains, this form of governance is ‘accomplished most of all by the Spirit of God. The church exists to discern the mind of Christ, not the will of the majority’.³⁷

It is the conviction that the Spirit is present and actively leading the congregation in and through Church meetings that allows Free Churches both to uphold the catholicity and unity of the church and underpins their claims to authority. As Wright comments, ‘[b]ecause Christ is there by his Spirit the congregation is empowered to govern its own affairs’.³⁸ Moreover, ‘[i]ts power to do this is a consequence of the church’s catholicity because in each church the whole church, from which each local church draws its life, expresses itself. It has long been held that the local church is more than a lonely outpost of the “real” church: it is in itself a manifestation of the catholic church, the body of Christ and as such is qualified for this task’.³⁹

To some extent, Wright is aware that this is an idealised picture. His conception of the pneumatological underpinnings of the Church meeting does not imply that any Church meeting – from the first Council of Nicaea to my own Baptist Church – is intrinsically infallible. In real life, Church meetings are meetings of fallen and fallible people. Wright acknowledged in *Challenge to Change* that:

Over the years, with the development of the British constitution and the formalising of business procedures, there has been a parallel tendency in Baptist churches to conceive of decision-making along the lines of parliamentary democracy, that is to say, in terms of motions amendments, voting and majority rule. The result has been distortion. To

Nigel Wright, *The Radical Kingdom: Restoration in Theory and Practice* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1986), 96.

³⁷ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 134.

³⁸ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 197.

³⁹ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 118-19.

manipulate the rules and procedures of a meeting does not require spirituality but a certain cast of mind learned by those who know how to play power games...A shift is needed from concern with constitutional methods to consensus, that is, sensing together what the mind of the Lord might be for his church and pursuing this on the basis of common agreement.⁴⁰

In a fallen and rebellious world (i.e., the world we actually inhabit), any given Church meeting might well, therefore, fail either to discern the mind of the Spirit accurately or to implement it faithfully. The Spirit's speech may be infallible but our hearing, and our willingness to obey him, is not.

Nevertheless, in Wright's mind, our discernment gains certainty, credibility and, ultimately, authority as it is shared with others and their testimony is added to ours. It is for this reason discernment is best undertaken in community with others, each of whom is also listening to the Spirit's lead.⁴¹

When we begin to synthesise some of these insights, a model emerges which accounts for Wright's commitment to the autonomy of the local Church, the supreme authority of scripture, and the subsidiary authority of tradition. Moreover, we can also offer some guidance to local congregations as they wrestle with issues of doctrine, mission and practice.

First, in this model the authority of tradition derives not from any ecclesial body but from the Spirit himself. The decisions of other church bodies have authority because the Spirit leads the church. Moreover, it is the same Spirit that constitutes and leads every church from first century Rome to twenty-first century Tehran. Each congregation has the same access to the Spirit and must seek to listen to him.

⁴⁰ Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 65.

⁴¹ Nigel G. Wright, *God on the Inside: The Holy Spirit in Holy Scripture* (Oxford: BRF, 2006), 93-4.

The voices of other congregations who have listened to the Spirit are therefore obviously relevant to the discernment of the immediate congregation.⁴² In turn this means that the history of Christian exegesis is relevant to the exegesis of present congregations precisely because it represents millennia of testimonies to how other believers heard the Spirit speak. This is what we call tradition. It is the recognition that the logic of the Baptist or Free conception of the Church meeting is equally applicable across history and geography.⁴³

That tradition is fallible. However, this is not because the Spirit is fallible nor is it because tradition has its origin in human beings rather than God (as some Protestant polemics would suggest). Rather the tradition represents the infallible Spirit speaking to and through fallible human beings. Its authority is the Spirit's, and its fallibility is ours.

Yet, while the tradition is intrinsically fallible in its reception and transmission, nevertheless the stronger the ecumenical consensus about a piece of exegesis or a formulation of systematic theology, and the older the witnesses to that position, the less likely it is that the church has misheard what the Spirit is saying to her. Conversely the less scope there is for a congregation in the present legitimately to dissent from that proposition or exegesis.

Thus far we have argued that the centrality of pneumatology in Wright's conception of the church can allow us to develop and understanding of the binding nature and authority of tradition which is consistent with Wright's commitment to Free Church principles. This argument begins to resolve some of the tensions that subsist in Wright's work and which we noted above.

There remains, however, the question of how Wright's understanding of tradition, even developed in the way we have proposed, might work in practice. Thus, for example, is there a mechanism by which Wright envisages that the local congregation can access the wider tradition of

⁴² A point that is particularly relevant to Wright's treatment of association between congregations, considered below.

⁴³ The parallel with Chesterton's concept of the 'democracy of the dead' is striking: G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: William Clowes, 1934), 36.

the church? Moreover, what are the consequences of a congregation choosing to disregard the tradition in its doctrine and practice? Wright's work suggests that the answers to these questions lie in three directions: the role of the minister,⁴⁴ the congregation itself, and association between local Churches. We will examine each of these points in turn.

The Role of the Minister and the Congregation

First, Wright argues for the presence of ordained ministers as a link between the local congregation and the wider church. Within this model, the minister is ordained to a 'translocal' role as part of God's 'gifts to the wider church'.⁴⁵ The minister is therefore called to a ministry which 'is universal and acts as a stewardship of the Word and sacrament entrusted to and standing over the universal church'.⁴⁶ In that sense, the minister is himself a means of the universal church and its tradition speaking and acting within the local congregation.

In parallel with this, the minister is also charged with 'a representative role in that they are mandated by the by the church to represent it to the wider church and to the wider community'.⁴⁷ The minister therefore faces in two directions: they bring the concerns and needs of the local congregation to the universal church and its tradition, and in turn speak the wisdom and tradition of the universal church into the life of the local congregation.

Such a role is not, Wright argues, absolutely necessary for a local congregation to thrive but is almost so:

Ministries are vital for the *bene esse* of the church; for its *esse* they are *almost* necessary, but not quite absolutely... [the local congregation] is wise to seek the oversight of the translocal

⁴⁴ Wright intentionally chooses the language of 'minister' to include different understandings of gifting and calling, including prophets, apostles, pastor-teachers, evangelists, *Free Church, Free State*, 166.

⁴⁵ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 165. Wright defends the language of ordination while defining it in a non-sacerdotal manner, *Free Church, Free State*, 170-1.

⁴⁶ *Free Church, Free State*, p.166.

⁴⁷ *Free Church, Free State*, p.171.

ministries in order that they might have access to those gifts and people Christ bestows on the church for its growth into maturity and unity with the whole body of Christ.⁴⁸

Wright believes that the Spirit acts in the life of the ordained minister, equipping and using them to serve in this way.⁴⁹

The first means by which the local congregation ought to encounter the tradition of the church, therefore, is through her minister. Wright, however, goes beyond this to the responsibility of the congregation itself.

The specific role and responsibilities of the congregation are less developed in Wright's work. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which he regards it as a duty of the lay members of a congregation to understand and live in keeping with the Christian tradition and therefore to act and choose in accordance with it. Thus, for example, he argues that:

[E]ssentially the tradition is not safeguarded *externally* by the act of laying on of hands from one generation to another but *internally* by faithfulness to the apostolic testimony; and that testimony is the property and responsibility not of ministers alone but of the 'household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.'⁵⁰

In this, Wright is not diminishing the importance of properly trained ministers (as his commitment to theological education demonstrates). Rather he perceives that there is, within faithful congregations, a kind of lived understanding of the deep meaning of the Christian faith which comes not from specific training or ordination but rather the ordinary life of a disciple.

These represent two means by which a Church meeting can itself encounter the tradition of the church in its exegesis, doctrinal formulation and decision making. Its congregation will already have

⁴⁸ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 173. Emphasis in the original.

⁴⁹ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 171.

⁵⁰ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 164-5. Emphasis in the original. The quote at the end is 1 Tim 3.15.

some form of intuitive grasp of the tradition by virtue of their own encounter with Christ. And it is the responsibility of her minister or ministers to explain and otherwise guide the congregation to read scripture and engage with its context in a way that is faithful to the consensus of the tradition.

The Role of Associations

There remains, however, a third mechanism of the local congregation encountering the voice of the Spirit in the tradition of the church. This comes through Wright's understanding of associations formed between congregations.⁵¹

It is here that we see the logic of Wright's implicit doctrine of tradition worked out more fully. As such it provides a helpful illustration and application of that doctrine in practice and is therefore worth examining with particular attention.

The Enduring Freedom of the Congregation

Wright begins his analysis by arguing, in terms that echo his description of the role of ordained ministers, that local congregations need to be open to the rest of the church if they are to operate properly. Thus, he claims that:

It is debatable whether any church can be truly church if it does not give recognition and demonstrate 'universal openness' to other churches...The same theological logic that undergirds the local church works for the wider church. If it is the presence of Christ in the gathering congregation that renders it competent, then that same Christ is present in the wider communion of churches and lends to it also an authority and wisdom that need to be heeded...The *competence* of the congregation was never meant to be an *omnipotence* which removes the need for interdependence. If openness to others is a fundamental condition of the *esse* of the church,

⁵¹ The fullest account of Wright's model of association is in *Free Church, Free State*, 182-202. This analysis will focus primarily on this account.

then supportive and co-operative fellowship certainly belong to the *bene esse* of the churches and the *plene esse* of the church will only be accomplished when all Christian congregations are working together in the bonds of the Spirit for the glory of God.⁵²

Critically, this vision extends beyond Wright's own ecclesial context, requiring an openness to the truth contained within every legitimate expression of Christianity regardless of denominational, geographic or temporal boundaries.

When particular denominations take these four marks of the church and apply them exclusively to themselves...then they actually add to the failure of the church...The four 'marks of the church' are not yet fully true of any one part of the church. They cannot be said to be our present possession, except by way of anticipation and promise; but they do set the agenda for the church of the present time.⁵³

Wright's argument then moves to consider the way that British Baptists have sought to relate to one another in networks and communions (often described using the label 'associations' and 'associating'). Wright explains that association:

protects the freedom of the local congregations from external compulsion and points to the essential insight: churches freely choose to relate to other congregations in order to express life together as the body of Christ more fully and for common purposes in the service of mission.⁵⁴

This is a clear statement of the autonomy of the local congregation. It is free from external control. Within this view, the local congregation is not obliged to relate to any particular church or body and, even if it is corrected by another church or group of churches, it is under no obligation to accept that correction by virtue of its relationship to

⁵² Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 183-4.

⁵³ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 186.

⁵⁴ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 186-7.

them. Through examining three 17th century Baptist confessions and articles of association Wright argues that:

Churches, then, are to hold fellowship with each other for the purpose of mutual support and correction, but this must not be allowed to become the usurping of the freedoms or powers of any member church or the exercise of power by one church or groups of churches over another. What is envisaged is a free association of churches held together by mutual trust and moral authority.⁵⁵

The association therefore has no formal power to bind the local congregation outside its moral authority and its ultimate sanction of withdrawing fellowship. It might be objected that, in the form of rebuke and excommunication, these are precisely the sanctions that any non-state church or para-church body can exercise over congregations, whether or not it exists within the Free Church tradition. Nevertheless, it reflects Wright's commitment to the freedom of the local congregation from state control and his sense that it is the local Church meeting that has the final say over its doctrine and practice. This autonomy can never, within the Free Church model, be finally devolved to another body or removed from the local congregation. The local association's role is to resource the congregation's decision making autonomy and mission, not to replace it.

The Limiting Power of Ecumenical Councils

Having offered a vision of associations as opportunities for relating and resourcing, which can never bind the local congregation, Wright then advances what, at first glance, appears to be a contradictory argument relating to synods and councils. He begins by arguing that:

the local church is competent to govern its own affairs, but that it is not omniscient...The doctrine of the autonomy of the local church allows each congregation considerable scope for exercising conscientious judgment in the

⁵⁵ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 188.

application of the gospel to its situation. Yet the gospel has a given-ness to it and so there is a limit: it is not up to individual churches or Christians to reinvent the faith that has been given. Even so, there are times when strategic and far-reaching judgments do need to be made and on which a great deal hangs...Here we are not in the sphere of individual choice but of the mind of the church, the *sensus fidelium*, the consensus of the faithful. Decisions of this magnitude cannot be made in the local congregation. They require the wisdom of the wider church as its representatives come together in synods and councils.⁵⁶

There are, therefore, some decisions of external bodies that, by their nature, bind the local congregation and cannot legitimately be ignored or overruled. Wright offers the 'ecumenical councils' as an example:

The definitive decisions over the essence of Christian belief about God were made at a series of 'ecumenical councils' in the first centuries of the church's life when the church remained relatively undivided.⁵⁷

Here Wright explicitly states that a local congregation is not free to reject the creeds formulated by the ecumenical councils. Moreover, this power to bind is directly linked to their ecumenical nature and the relative unity of the church at that time.⁵⁸

Wright goes on to draw out this link further:

With growing division, the possibility of further such councils has gone, but in more partial ways the denominations and

⁵⁶ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 191-2.

⁵⁷ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 192.

⁵⁸ Wright does not address the point that these were decisions made by bishops, operating within an explicitly episcopal system under the supervision (at least for some of the councils) of an emperor. Nor is he clear how many councils he believes to be definitive and therefore not open to question.

sub-traditions of the church all have their ways of consulting together and seeking God's wisdom in their imperfect state.⁵⁹

At this point Wright has offered a significant qualification to his doctrine of the autonomy and liberty of the local congregation. Associations of churches or congregations, freely entered into by a local congregation, will not normally bind it. Their decisions and support may be helpful, and even necessary in the life of the local church. Nevertheless, they do not constrain the Church's freedom.

There are, however, matters, particularly relating to doctrine, that the local congregation is not free to determine for itself. Here it should defer to the judgment of the wider church. The degree of deference required will depend upon the ecumenical acceptance of that judgment. Where, for example, the judgment was formulated by a body with widespread ecumenical participation and has been almost universally accepted over a prolonged period, it is, Wright argues, 'definitive.' The further it falls from this ideal, however, the greater the local congregation's scope for legitimate dissent.

This is precisely what we would expect if Wright's doctrine of tradition is grounded in his pneumatology in the way we argued for above, particularly if, as Wright argues, the 'same theological logic that undergirds the local church works for the wider church'.⁶⁰ It also explains why, in Wright's conception, the primary role of the associations is to resource the local Church.⁶¹ Associations provide one way of the local congregation accessing the tradition of the wider church. But their judgments are valid only to the extent that they represent that tradition accurately and helpfully.

⁵⁹ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 192.

⁶⁰ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 183.

⁶¹ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 189.

Conclusions

In practice this means that when a congregation is addressing a question of theology or practice as it pertains to their context, the history of Christian exegesis and doctrinal formulation on this point is vitally relevant and demands to be listened to with respect and a presumption of obedience when a consensus can be discerned. This can be encountered in three ways: through the minister charged with representing the universal church to the local congregation, through the Spirit-formed mind of the faithful congregation itself, and through the guidance and discipline of a wider association of Free Churches.

Such a proposition does not undermine the autonomy of the local congregation. Rather it acknowledges that the congregation can be independent of formal ecclesial authority precisely because, and only because, she submits to the voice of the Spirit and therefore seeks to hear what the Spirit is saying with humility and self-denial. It is fundamentally the posture of those who say 'not my will but yours be done'.

While such a model might be critiqued on the grounds that it is unworkable, a robustly understood commitment to association, classical theological education of ministers, and spiritual formation of the congregation mitigates these problems. Moreover, Wright would contend, the problems attendant on the Free Church model are preferable to those arising in the alternatives.⁶²

This represents a development of Wright's evangelical theology but one which is consistent with the principles contained within it and is necessary to make his vision of autonomous congregations operating within the orthodox and catholic Christian tradition effective.

Note on Contributor

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⁶² Wright has repeatedly considered the alternatives and explained why, despite its flaws, he nevertheless considers the Baptist understanding of the church the best available option. See, for example, *Challenge to Change*, 96-113, *Free Church, Free State*, 119-35.