

July 12, 2009

TRADITION IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH: PART 1
THE MISUSE OF TRADITION
MATTHEW 15.1-9

1. WHAT IS TRADITION?

a. The tradition of the elders: the Scribes and Pharisees

The oral law tradition: There were those among the Jews that believed that at Mt. Sinai God gave Moses a written law *and* a non-written law. This non-written law was to be handed down orally through the years by the teachers in Israel. The oral law tradition contradicts the Scriptures at points (as Jesus makes clear).

Oral law tradition used to interpret the written law authoritatively. When Scripture came in conflict with oral law, contradiction was only apparent, not real. The oral law came to have greater authority than the Scriptures themselves in this way (all the while the adherents saying that they were honoring the Scriptures).

When the oral law tradition was exalted to this position, there was no other objective written standard by which it could be judged.

What happens when the leadership becomes corrupt and twists the Scriptures to suit their own purposes (something seen time and again in the history of Israel)? Jesus points out a common occurrence in Mt 15.

Tradition is misused when adopted beliefs and practices are explicitly or functionally equal to or above the Scriptures themselves. Tradition is misused when it is used to avoid responsibility given in God's clear commands.

Note: not all tradition is bad and/or sinful. Many Protestants have made that leap, and it is actually not a biblical leap to make.

The contrast is not as stark as "tradition v. Scripture." But there is a proper relationship; not always mutually exclusive.

The NT writers speak of holding to traditions: 2Thess 2.15; 3.6; cf. also 1Cor 15.3

"Traditionalism:" "You see, the Scriptures themselves speak about the words of the apostles being of equal authority as the epistles" (as in 2Thess 2.15). True. But consider the whole context.

Context: NT is not complete. (Therefore Scripture is not complete.) Not all of the traditions of Jesus and Apostles yet written. Doesn't mean that there was a "secret, oral tradition" that would come along side and infallibly interpret the Scriptures. Apostolic tradition eventually was inscripturated (i.e. written down) so there would be a firm tradition that could not be corrupted by sinful men in the church (cf. Mt 24; Ac 20).

The Scriptures are *the* Tradition of the Church. They are the **only** infallible, inerrant, and supremely authoritative standard for the church to judge everything outside of them, including her own traditions.

Traditionalism: "Without the Tradition of the Church there would be no Scripture. The Church authorized the canon of Scripture."

NT canon (i.e. the authoritative books of the NT; canon = "measuring rod") not officially recognized by the Church until 4th c in North African councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397 & 419). Decisions had to be made as to what books were Apostolic and which were not.

The Church *recognized* the canon of Scripture but did not *give* authority to the Scriptures. E.g., John the Baptist and Jesus.

The Church does have authority, but it is declarative and ministerial. That is, it is always subject to the Scriptures and must declare what the Scriptures say. It is a servant to the Scriptures but not the master over them. In this position, the Church may err (and has erred) and may, can, and should be corrected for her misspeaking on many occasions.

b. Tradition in the Roman Catholic Church

Holds a view of two sources of revelation: the Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. Note Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraphs 81, 82, 97 [¶97 "**Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture make up a single deposit of the Word of God**, in which as in a mirror, the pilgrim Church contemplates God, the source of all her riches."]

Seen developed more in the 19th c Vatican I council in which the RCC declared that the pope, when defining doctrines or morals

and speaking *ex cathedra*, is infallible. And, by definition, that which is declared by him in this teaching office as the supreme head of the church is irreformable.

c. Tradition in the Eastern Orthodox Church

Everything is Sacred Tradition in some sense, including the Scriptures. Scripture itself is understood as part of one living Tradition in the Church. Distinctions are made, but they meld together and are inseparably one; found in the Scriptures, ecumenical councils, and the liturgy of the church (specifically “mysteries” = to what we call sacraments).

The ecumenical councils have ruled definitively and authoritatively so that the Tradition of the Church cannot be questioned. Pomazansky (*Orthodox Theology*, 41-2) says that these are “... inviolable” Whatever the Church declares about the Scriptures must be obeyed and is beyond critique and, therefore, beyond reform.

Archimandrites Chrysostomos and Auxentios: “But true authority, the action of the Holy Spirit as evidenced in unified revelation of Scripture and Tradition, is wholly mystical. Thus advisedly (since his point can be misunderstood) we can quote Professor Hromadka’s contention that: ‘Not even Christ should be understood and looked upon as an authority to which the Church is subordinated.’” (Archimandrite, Chrysostomos and Archimandrite, Auxentios. *Scripture and Tradition*. Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1984. p. 47; quoted in Mathison, 234)

Probably arises out of belief of nature of the Church and how it is united to Christ by the same Spirit. If Christ cannot err, then the Church cannot err. The two speak with one will and one voice.

Apostolic Tradition was preserved in the Church and handed down to us in the “consensus of the fathers” (i.e., the fathers of the church that are basically up to the 4th c. From that point on, all other traditions were simply validations of those fathers.)

The consensus of the fathers is what they determine the consensus to be. If there are fathers with whom they disagree or what they consider to be out of the consensus, their opinions are dismissed. All branches use the fathers to prove their positions; positions which differ greatly at important points.

The “consensus of the fathers” is found in the Church, and especially within the ecumenical councils; 7 which they accept as *true* Councils. Basically, “We only accept true councils, and the true councils are the ones we determine to be true.”

Liturgy is the “secret” tradition handed down through the centuries. Preserved in the unbroken succession of bishops in the Church.

The fathers do refer to the fact that these rites were kept secret. Seems to be an historical reason for this: the persecution of the Church in the first 3 centuries. Kept secret for protection. But things such as long period of catechism before baptism are contradicted by immediate baptism by the Apostles, e.g., in Acts (chs 2, 8, 16).

God also wrote down prescriptions for his people’s worship in the OC. Even the secret aspects of it (e.g. the Day of Atonement) were spelled out and taught to the people from the Scriptures so that they would understand. Gentiles could even participate in a number of worship experiences (cf. Num 15).

Conclusion concerning the Roman Catholic Church and the EO

Both share basic presupposition (either explicitly or functionally): the church is infallible (i.e. it is incapable of error). If this is true, it would have to be true always. Infallibility is no good if you can’t tell where you are infallible.

d. Tradition in the Protestant/Evangelical Church

Reaction: *Solo Scriptura*; i.e. Scripture only, not recognizing legitimate Church authority (which can be local or historical).

Problem: Scripture itself sets up authorities in the Church to be obeyed (Heb 13.7, 17).

Problem: each individual must ultimately determine for himself if the canon of Scripture is actually true b/c the Scripture does not give a list of books of Scripture.