

July 26, 2009

TRADITION IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH: PART 3

SOLA SCRIPTURA

MATTHEW 15.1-9

3. WHAT IS THE PROPER RELATIONSHIP OF TRADITION AND SCRIPTURE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH?

In giving due honor to our fathers in the faith (past and present), we are to respect the wisdom of the ages so that our interpretations of Scripture are informed by what our fathers pass down to us and we build upon it as we continue to mature as the Church. The honor due our fathers does not mean that we exalt them or their interpretations above Scripture, but that we, in humility and great deference, allow Scripture to critique their interpretations as the uniquely and inherently infallible rule for the Faith.

A. TRADITION IS TO BE RESPECTED, GIVEN DUE HONOR, AND BUILT UPON AS IT REFLECTS THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH THROUGH THE AGES.

1. The Scriptures are entrusted to the Church for preservation and interpretation.

The Church (= the people of God) has always been the guardian of Scripture. Cf. Rom 3.2; 9.4-5: To Israel the oracles of God were entrusted. The Church is the new Israel (cf. e.g. Gal 6.16; 1Pt 2.9) and is entrusted with the Scriptures.

The Church, not the academy, is entrusted with the Scriptures. The Church is the pillar and ground of truth (1Tm 3.15). The truth of which the Church is the pillar and ground is contained in the Holy Scriptures, God's infallible Word.

Common directive in Lev & Dt: "guard (keep) my statutes and judgments" (Lev 18.5, 26; 20.22; 25.18; Dt 7.11; 11.1; 30.16). Preservation as well as obedience is enjoined.

This guardianship involved having some "control" over the Scriptures. They guarded the Scriptures much like the Levites guarded the Tabernacle (i.e. God's holiness). They were to guard their purity and not allow anything—not even their traditions—to obscure them or distort them in any way. In our guarding we are not above the Scriptures or even equal to the Scriptures. We are guarding them from outside invaders.

Church has the authority to interpret the Scriptures and expect compliance. When consistent with the Scriptures, the Word of the Church carries the authority of the Word of God itself. Church authorities are to be obeyed: Hb 13.7, 17.

This ministry would continue after the Apostles were gone. Ministers are to preach the Word (2Tm 4.2), rightly dividing the word of truth (2Tm 2.15). The man of God is equipped to fulfill his ministry through the God-breathed Scriptures (2Tm 3.16-17).

The Scriptures grant the Church and her leaders authority as ministers to the Church to communicate what God says. Reformed Church has recognized this. 2nd Helvetic Confession: "THE PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD IS THE WORD OF GOD..."

Christ has provided gifts to the church in the form of apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry and the building up of the church (Eph 4.11-12). When consistent with Scripture, they are to be obeyed.

We are to regard not only the present day authorities, but the authorities God has provided throughout history. (Should be noted that their authority is not any greater than present day authorities in the Church.) The authority of the Church given by God from the Scriptures and in relation to the Scriptures is real.

2. The Church need not be infallible in order to be a true or legitimate authority.

The Scriptures being the only inherently infallible authority does not rule out lesser fallible authorities. When we speak of the Scriptures being the only inherent infallible authority, this doesn't mean that lesser or subordinate authorities are ruled out. E.g. Parents (Ex 20.12) and civil magistrates (Rom 13.1-7).

The Church is a lesser, fallible authority, but is a lawful authority. Leaders are capable of error (as is spoken of in Scripture and seen in history). We are in the process of maturing and will make errors and need cleansing along the way; sometimes from traditions that distort the Scriptures. B/c the Church is fallible doesn't mean she can't be trusted (any more than parents striving to be faithful).

As we confess in the Nicene Creed, you may confess that you believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church that is fallible and that need not be perfect just yet. God in the Scriptures has given the Church this place in his economy.

3. The Church may make inerrant decisions and statements without being infallible.

Whenever the Church in the person of her ordained leaders speaks in accord with the Scriptures, the Church speaks inerrantly. To say that the Church is capable of error is not the same thing as saying that the Church always errs.

The Church may declare truths that are consistent with the teaching of Scripture *inerrantly*. E.g., the deity of Christ. This is not confined to using the exact language of Scripture, but using words that reflect the teaching of Scripture. E.g. "Trinity."

Great consensus on many such doctrines. The consensus doesn't give these doctrines authority, but they recognize what the Scriptures teach and proclaim it. The way language is used outside of the Scripture may be debatable. That should be fine. It is the substance of the doctrines that should be affirmed.

4. The Church need not be infallible to be the guardian of Scripture.

Note Israel. At any given point in Israel's history Israel as a whole embodied in her kings, priests, and prophets were corrupt. Many times the majority or the powers that be distorted Scripture for personal gains. Cf. e.g. 1Kg 22

Prophets, many times, intentionally distorted God's Word for particular political purposes. But did this nullify the fact that Israel was the guardian of God's Word; the people entrusted to guard and protect the Scriptures? No.

Israel was the pillar and ground of truth as much as the Church in Christ is now as Paul says. But it is not b/c the Church—old or new—is incapable of error. It is b/c God has designated us as such by his Word and somehow, some way, mysteriously works through an imperfect Church to protect his Holy Scriptures.

As corrupt as she became in her practices and in her exaltation of her traditions over Scripture, she was still the pillar and ground of truth *because of what she guarded or because of what was entrusted to her*.

The way we know that priests, kings, and prophets erred is precisely because we have a written standard given by God to judge their actions. If they had been of equal authority, they themselves would have been the standard of judgment.

2. BECAUSE THE CHURCH OF ALL AGES IS SUBJECT TO ERROR, THE SCRIPTURES MUST ALWAYS STAND AS THE ONLY INHERENTLY INFALLIBLE AUTHORITY FOR ALL MATTERS OF THE FAITH.

The Church has *delegated* authority not *absolute* authority. This means that the authority can be questioned and is ultimately judged by the One who gave the authority to the Church: the Absolute Authority.

Objections: 1. *"If we don't have the Tradition, then who is to say who is right and who is wrong concerning the interpretation of Scripture? The Scriptures become a wax nose. Look at all the disagreements."* Problem: *one* Tradition does not exist. Oral tradition can become convoluted easily. One reason why must be written down (cf. Lk 1.1ff.)

The Church has used the Scriptures to validate everything from iconolatry to the Crusades. Councils have disagreed with one another on many issues. It is not only the Protestants who disagree among ourselves. The only way we know that any of these errors is wrong is that we have the Scriptures themselves.

2. *Jesus promised the Church that he would lead us into all truth. In this we are different from Israel of old who strayed all of the time. We cannot fall into the same error as Israel because the Church, as Paul says, is the pillar and ground of truth.* Problem: the NT draws parallels between the NC Church's capability of error and the OC proneness to error.

God entrusts his infallible Word to a fallible people. These people must submit to Scripture and walk by faith.

3. *"Every church has its own traditions which de facto interpret and supercede Scripture."* True. But we have not codified our traditions over Scripture. It is an aberration for Reformation Protestants from our principles. These other communions have high-handedly codified their sinful positions.

4. *The canon of Scripture is the result of the Church's authoritative decision. The canon of Scripture, therefore, is a product of the Church's authoritative, sacred Tradition. Scripture gains authority from the Church.* The Church recognized the authority of Scripture b/c of its nature. It did not *give* authority to the Scriptures.

The Church may make inerrant judgments about issues—e.g. the canon—without being infallible in everything.