

The Authority of Tradition

By Greg Witherow

The Reformation was founded on two pillars or central tenets that divided Protestants from the Catholic Church. The first pillar (the material cause) of the Reformation was that salvation was by faith alone (*sola fide*). The second pillar (the formal cause) of the Reformation was that scripture alone was authoritative (*sola scriptura*) in the life of the church. This principle states that scripture alone can bind Christians in their beliefs. In contrast, Catholics look to three sources of authority, namely scripture, tradition and the Magisterium. By way of analogy Catholics have written laws (scripture), legal precedence (tradition) and a court system (the Magisterium) that guides the Christian into truth. Protestants on the other hand have the written law (scripture), while rejecting any other **binding** authority¹. Protestants insist the Church usurps scripture with man-made traditions and a corrupted Magisterium. We will examine the issue here.

Scripture is Authoritative

Historical Protestantism² and the Catholic Church concur that scripture is inspired by God, infallible, without error and therefore authoritative in the life of the believer. The Bible is different from any other book or writings, either secular or religious. Saint Paul, in his letter to Timothy attests to scriptures divine inspiration.

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”³

Modernists have claimed that while scripture *contains* God’s word, its human authors sometimes erred in matters of history or science. But the Catholic Church and historical Protestantism reject such notions. The Magisterium of the Church states the following:

“[The chair of Peter] also teaches that Divine inspiration extends to every part of the Bible without the slightest exception, and that no error can occur in the inspired text: It would be wholly impious to limit inspiration to certain portions only of Scripture or to concede that the sacred authors themselves could have erred.” (The papal encyclical *Spiritus Paraclitus*, section 21).

Catholics are therefore prodded by Mother Church to read the word of God.

“The Church forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful...to learn the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, section 133).

¹ Practicing *sola scriptura*, it is easy to see why there are over 20,000 Protestant denominations. See the web site <http://www.bringyou.to/apologetics/a106.htm> for more information.

² I ignore liberal Protestants and dissenting Catholics who stray from orthodox Church teaching.

³ 2 Timothy 3:16

The Tradition of Men

Catholics (and Orthodox churches) reject that the Bible is the **only** authority in the life of the Church. It is on this point that Catholics and Protestants are in disagreement. Why do Protestants reject *authoritative* tradition? It is because Christ condemned the Pharisees for traditions that negated the word of God. The following illustrates the point.

“Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, ‘Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.’ He answered and said to them, ‘Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your **tradition**? For God commanded, saying, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God then he need not honor his father or mother.’ Thus you have made the commandment of God **of no effect by your tradition**. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: ‘These people draw near to me with their mouth, and honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. And in vain they worship me, **teaching as doctrines the commandments of men**.’”⁴

Saint Paul also had harsh word for the use of tradition in his letter to the Colossians.

“As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, **according to the tradition of men**, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.”⁵

These are strong words and must be weighed carefully. It should be noted that the traditions are referred to as “traditions of men”. This is important as we study our topic.

Apostolic Tradition

To be exhaustive in understanding our topic we need to examine other statements about tradition in the Bible. In our next passage, we find that Saint Paul tells the Corinthians to obey the traditions passed on to them.

“Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and **keep the traditions** just as I delivered them to you.”⁶

Some Bibles use the word “ordinances” rather than tradition in this passage. But the underlying Greek word “paradosis” is the same word Christ and Paul used in the previous

⁴ Matthew 15:1-9 This scene is repeated in Mark 7:1-13

⁵ Colossians 2:6-8

⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:2

texts. In another epistle Saint Paul claims tradition is authoritative, whether the tradition is written (scripture) or unwritten (sacred tradition).

“Therefore, brethren, **stand fast and hold the traditions** (paradosis) which you were taught, whether **by word OR our epistle.**”⁷

“Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to **keep away from believers** who are living in idleness and **not according to the tradition** (paradosis) that they received from us.”⁸

Paul **demand**s the traditions (paradosis) be obeyed while Christ and he practically anathematized those who practiced tradition (paradosis) in other settings. Paul is not schizophrenic. Rather he recognizes one type of tradition as authoritative, the other not.

The Necessity of Tradition

There is no chapter in the Bible that lists the books of scripture. Nor do all the books in the Bible necessarily self authenticate themselves as scripture. For example, we only know Matthew wrote his gospel because of tradition (he didn't sign it). The same is true of Mark's gospel. To this day we don't know who wrote Hebrews. The books of Hebrews, Revelations, James, 2 Peter, Jude, 2 John and 3 John were all disputed.

The Old Testament canon was not set when the Church age began. The Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Greek speaking Jews each revered their own set of books. This last group revered the Septuagint, the Old Testament Bible of the early Church and the one most frequently quoted by Christ and the apostles. It contains the deutercanonicals.

To settle the canon, the Church utilized apostolic tradition in the councils of Rome (A.D. 382), Hippo (A.D. 393) and Carthage (A.D. 397) to give us the Bible we have today. **This is a historical fact.** Protestants rely on these councils for their New Testament. But this presents a dilemma. If Protestants concede the **judgment of the Church** on the canon as **infallibly certain**, then they negate their creed “sola scriptura”. Such certainty concedes tradition (and the Church) is elevated to an infallible and binding authority. At all costs this concession must be rejected – or else the Reformation is over. Instead, Protestants embrace the following formula, as stated by Calvinist theologian R.C. Sproul,

“The Catholic Church believes in an **infallible list of infallible books** while the Protestant churches believe in a **fallible list of infallible books**”⁹.

This “logic” provides the mortar for one of the two pillars on which the Reformation stands or falls. Protestants are forced to embrace this rationale at the risk of losing their legitimacy. But few Protestants have reflected or been confronted with such conclusions.

⁷ 2 Thessalonians 2:15

⁸ 2 Thessalonians 3:6

⁹ See R.C. Sproul's book, Essential Truths of the Christian Faith, page 22.

Tradition on Tradition

The Epiphanius of Salamis A.D. 375

“It is needful also to make use of tradition, for not everything can be gotten from sacred Scripture. The holy apostles handed down some things in the scriptures, other things in tradition” (*Medicine Chest Against All Heresies* 61:6)

Augustine A.D. 400

“The custom [of not rebaptizing converts] . . . may be supposed to have had its origin in apostolic tradition, just as there are many things which are observed by the whole Church, and therefore are fairly held to have been enjoined by the apostles, which yet are not mentioned in their writings” (*Against the Donatists* 5:23[31])

John Chrysostom A.D. 402

"[Paul commands,] ‘Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you have been taught, whether by word or by our letter’ [2 Thess. 2:15]. From this it is clear that they did not hand down everything by letter, but there is much also that was not written. Like that which was written, the unwritten too is worthy of belief. So let us regard the tradition of the Church also as worthy of belief. Is it a tradition? Seek no further" (*Homilies on Second Thessalonians*)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

Paragraph 84: The apostles entrusted the “Sacred deposit” of the faith (the *depositum fidei*), contained in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, to the whole of the Church. “By adhering to [this heritage] the entire holy people, united to its pastors, remains always faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and the prayers”.

Paragraph 86: Yet **this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God**, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it **listens** to this devotedly, **guards** it with dedication and **expounds** it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith.

Summary

The book of Judges ends with the condemnation; “each man did what was right in his own eyes”. In the Protestant model every person, guided by the Holy Spirit, decides *for himself* what scripture means and requires. **No other authority binds him**. The result is denominational chaos, with churches divided over doctrine. But God is not the author of doctrinal chaos¹⁰, sin is. While scripture condemns division in the church, Protestants accept such divisions as the cost of their creed¹¹, a tradition that usurps the word of God.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 14:33

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 1:10-17