

Scripture, Tradition, and Rome, Part 3

Scripture: Matthew 15:6–9; Acts 2:42; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 2 Thessalonians 3:6–13; 2 Timothy 2:2
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How Do We Know the Doctrine of the Apostles?

Now let's examine the key Scriptures Rome cites to try to justify the existence of extrabiblical tradition. Since many of these passages are similar, it will suffice to reply to the main ones. First we'll examine the key verses that speak of how Apostolic doctrine was transmitted, and then we'll explore what the apostle Paul meant when he spoke of "tradition."

Second Timothy 2:2: "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also." Here the apostle Paul instructs Timothy, a young pastor, to train other faithful men for the task of leadership in the church. There is no hint of apostolic succession in this verse, nor is there any suggestion that in training these men Timothy would be passing on to them an infallible tradition with authority equal to the Word of God.

On the contrary, what this verse describes is simply the process of discipleship. Far from imparting to these men some apostolic authority that would guarantee their infallibility, Timothy was to choose men who had proved themselves faithful, teach them the gospel, and equip them in the principles of church leadership he had learned from Paul. What Timothy was to entrust to them was the essential truth Paul himself had preached "in the presence of many witnesses." What was this truth?

It was not some undisclosed tradition, such as the Assumption of Mary, which would be either unheard of or disputed for centuries until a pope declared *ex cathedra* that it was truth. What Timothy was to hand on to other men was the same doctrine Paul had preached before "many witnesses." Paul was speaking of the gospel itself. It was the same message Paul commanded Timothy to preach: and it is the same message that is preserved in Scripture and sufficient to equip every man of God (2 Timothy 3:16–4:2).

In short, this verse is wholly irrelevant to the Catholic claim that tradition received from the apostles is preserved infallibly by her bishops. Nothing in this verse suggests that the truth Timothy would teach other faithful men would be preserved without error from generation to generation. That is indeed what Scripture says of itself: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching" (2 Timothy 3:16)—but no such assertion is ever made for tradition handed down orally.

Like Timothy, we are to guard the truth that has been entrusted to us. But the only reliable canon, the only infallible doctrine, the only binding principles, and the only saving message, is the God-breathed truth of Scripture.

Acts 2:42: "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." This verse simply states that the early church followed the apostles' teaching as their rule of faith. Once again this passage says nothing about apostolic succession and contains no hint of a guarantee that "the apostles' teaching" would be infallibly

preserved through any means other than Scripture.

Note also that this verse describes the attitude of the earliest converts to Christianity. The "they" at the beginning of the verse refers back to verse 41 and the three thousand souls who were converted at Pentecost. These were for the most part rank-and-file lay people. And their one source of Christian doctrine (this was before any of the New Testament had been penned) was the oral teaching of the apostles.

This verse is even more irrelevant to the question of infallible tradition than 2 Timothy 2:2. The only point it asserts that is remotely germane to the issue is that the source of authority for the early church was apostolic teaching.

No one who holds to the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* would dispute that point. Let it be stated as clearly as possible: Protestants do not deny that the oral teaching of the apostles was authoritative, inerrant truth, binding as a rule of faith on those who heard it.

Moreover, if there were any promise in Scripture that the exact words or full sense of the apostolic message would be infallibly preserved through word of mouth by an unbroken succession of bishops, we would be bound to obey that tradition as a rule of faith.

Scripture, however, which is God-breathed, never speaks of any other God-breathed authority; it never authorizes us to view tradition on an equal or superior plane of authority; and while it makes the claim of inerrancy for itself, it never acknowledges any other infallible source of authority. Word-of-mouth tradition is never said to be theopneustos, God-breathed, or infallible.

What Tradition Did Paul Command Adherence to?

We've already noted, however, that Catholic apologists claim they do see verses in Scripture that accord authority to tradition. Even non-Catholic versions of Scripture speak of a certain "tradition" that is to be received and obeyed with unquestioning reverence.

What of these verses? Protestants often find them difficult to explain, but in reality they make better arguments against the Catholic position than they do against *sola Scriptura*. Let's examine the main ones:

First Corinthians 11:2: "Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you." Those words of Paul to the Corinthians speak of tradition, do they not?

Yet as is often true, the meaning is plain when we look at the context. And examining the context, we discover this verse offers no support whatsoever for the Roman Catholic notion of infallible tradition.

First of all, the apostle is speaking not of traditions passed down to the Corinthians by someone else though word of mouth. This "tradition" is nothing other than doctrine the Corinthians had heard directly from Paul's own lips during his ministry in their church. The Greek word translated "traditions" is *paradosis*, translated "ordinances" in the King James Version. The Greek root contains the idea of

transmission, and the idea is no doubt doctrine that was transmitted by oral means. In this case, however, it refers only to Paul's own preaching—not to someone else's report of what Paul taught.

The Corinthians had had the privilege of sitting under the apostle Paul's ministry for a year and a half (Acts 18:11), so it is ironic that of all the churches described in the New Testament, Corinth was one of the most problematic. Paul's first epistle to this church deals with a series of profound problems related to church discipline and practice, including serious sin in their midst, disunity among the brethren, disorder in church meetings, Christians who were taking one another to court, abuse of spiritual gifts, and so on. Second Corinthians is an extended defense of Paul's ministry in the face of opposition and hostility. Someone in the church—possibly even someone whom Paul had entrusted with a position of leadership—had evidently fomented a rebellion against Paul during his long absence.

The Corinthians knew Paul. He had been their pastor. Yet they were obviously slipping away from the moorings he had so carefully established during his pastorate there. Far from being instruments through which Paul's tradition was infallibly preserved and handed down, the Corinthians were rebelling against his apostleship! That is why Paul encouraged them to remember what they had heard from him and follow it to the letter.

What did he teach during that year and a half in their midst? We have no way of knowing precisely, but we have every reason to believe that the substance of his teaching was the same truth that is recorded throughout his epistles and elsewhere in the New Testament. Once again, we do know for certain that everything essential for thoroughly equipping Christians for life and godliness was preserved in Scripture (2 Timothy 3:15-17). The rest is not recorded for us, and nothing anywhere in Scripture indicates that it was handed down through oral tradition—especially not through any means that guaranteed it would be inspired and infallible.

First Corinthians 11:2 in particular teaches no such thing. It is nothing but Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians that they remember and obey his apostolic teaching. It reflects Paul's own personal struggle to protect and preserve the doctrinal tradition he had carefully established in Corinth. But again, there is no implication whatsoever that Paul expected this tradition to be infallibly preserved through any inspired means other than Scripture. On the contrary, Paul was concerned lest his ministry among the Corinthians prove to have been in vain (cf. 2 Corinthians 6:1).

Second Thessalonians 2:15: "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us." This is perhaps the favorite verse of Catholic apologists when they want to support the Catholic appeal to tradition, because the verse plainly delineates between the written word and oral "traditions."

Again the Greek word is *paradosis*. Clearly, the apostle is speaking of doctrine, and it is not to be disputed that the doctrine he has in mind is authoritative, inspired truth.

So what is this inspired tradition that they received "by word of mouth"? Doesn't this verse rather clearly support the Catholic position?

No, it does not. Again, the context is essential to a clear understanding of what Paul was saying. The Thessalonians had evidently been misled by a forged letter, supposedly from the apostle Paul, telling

them that the day of the Lord had already come (2 Thessalonians 2:2). The entire church had apparently been upset by this, and the apostle Paul was eager to encourage them.

For one thing, he wanted to warn them not to be taken in by phony "inspired truth." And so he told them clearly how to recognize a genuine epistle from him: it would be signed in his own handwriting: "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write" (2 Thessalonians 3:17). He wanted to ensure that they would not be fooled again by forged epistles.

But even more important, he wanted them to stand fast in the teaching they had already received from him. He had already told them, for example, that the day of the Lord would be preceded by a falling away, and the unveiling of the man of lawlessness. "Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?" (2 Thessalonians 2:5). There was no excuse for them to be troubled by a phony letter, for they had heard the actual truth from his own mouth already.

Now, no one—even the most impassioned champion of *sola Scriptura*—would deny that Paul had taught the Thessalonians many things by word of mouth. No one would deny that the teaching of an apostle carried absolute authority. The point of debate between Catholics and Protestants is whether that teaching was infallibly preserved by word of mouth. So the mere reference to truth received firsthand from Paul himself is again, irrelevant as support for the Catholic position. Certainly nothing here suggests that the tradition Paul delivered to the Thessalonians is infallibly preserved for us anywhere except in Scripture itself.

In fact, the real thrust of what Paul is writing here is antithetical to the spirit of Roman Catholic tradition. Paul is not encouraging the Thessalonians to receive some tradition that had been delivered to them via second- or third-hand reports. On the contrary, he was ordering them to receive as infallible truth only what they had heard directly from his own lips.

Paul was very concerned to correct the Thessalonians' tendency to be led astray by false epistles and spurious tradition. From the very beginning the Thessalonians had not responded to the gospel message as nobly as the Bereans, who "received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

It is highly significant that the Bereans are explicitly commended for examining the apostolic message in light of Scripture. They had the priority right: Scripture is the supreme rule of faith, by which everything else is to be tested. Unsure of whether they could trust the apostolic message—which, by the way, was as inspired and infallible and true as Scripture itself—the Bereans erased all their doubt by double-checking the message against Scripture. Yet Roman Catholics are forbidden by their Church to take such an approach! They are told that the Church through her bishops dispenses the only true and infallible understanding of Scripture. Therefore it is pointless to test the Catholic Church's message by Scripture; for if there appears to be a conflict—and make no mistake, there are many—Rome says her traditions carry more weight than her critics' interpretation of Scripture.

What the apostle was telling the Thessalonians was nothing like what Rome tells faithful Catholics. Paul was urging the Thessalonians to test all truth-claims by Scripture, and by the words they had heard personally from his own lips. And since the only words of the apostles that are infallibly

preserved for us are found in Scripture, that means that we, like the Bereans, must compare everything with Scripture to see whether it is so.

Roman Catholic apologists protest that only a fraction of Paul's messages to the Thessalonians are preserved in the two brief epistles Paul wrote to that church. True, but may not we assume that what he taught the Thessalonians were the very truths that are found in generous measure throughout all his epistles—justification by faith, the true gospel of grace, the sovereignty of God, the Lordship of Christ, and a host of other truths? The New Testament gives us a full-orbed Christian theology. Who can prove that anything essential is omitted? On the contrary, we are assured that Scripture is sufficient for salvation and spiritual life (2 Tim 3:15-17). Where does Scripture ever suggest that there are unwritten truths that are necessary for our spiritual well-being? One thing is certain: these words in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 imply no such thing.

Second Thessalonians 3:6: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us." This is the only other verse in all the New Testament where Paul uses the words *tradition* or *traditions* to speak of apostolic truth that is to be obeyed.

By now, Paul's use of this term should be well established. This cannot be a reference to truth passed down from generation to generation. Again, Paul is speaking of a "tradition" received firsthand from him.

This is the closing section of the epistle. Paul is summing up. And he once again underscores the importance of the teaching the Thessalonians had received directly from his mouth. The "tradition" he speaks of here is doctrine so crucial that anyone who refuses to heed it and live by it should be rejected from the fellowship.

What is this "tradition"? Is it Marian theology, or dogma about the efficacy of relics, or other teachings unique to Roman Catholicism? Not at all—it is simple, practical apostolic doctrine, taught and lived out by example while Paul was among the Thessalonians. Paul goes on to define specifically what "tradition" he has in mind:

We did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, that you might follow our example. For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone will not work, neither let him eat. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good (2 Thessalonians 3:7-13).

In other words, Paul was speaking of simple, practical doctrine about stewardship of one's time, a man's responsibility to work and provide for his family, and personal discipline in daily life. These truths are now part of holy Scripture, by virtue of Paul's including them in this epistle. Put that together with everything else the New Testament records, and you have every part of the apostolic message that was infallibly preserved for us.

Is the sum of Scriptural truth a sufficient rule of faith for the Christian? We have the Bible's own assurance that it is. Scripture alone is sufficient to lead us to salvation and fully equip us for life and eternity (2 Timothy 3:15-17). Therefore we may know with certainty that every essential aspect of the apostolic message is included in Scripture.

Note that Paul clearly regarded his epistles as inspired, authoritative Scripture. He charged the Thessalonians with these instructions: "And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame."

So the written words of Scripture are binding. Apostolic preaching was equally binding for those who heard it from the apostles' own mouths. Beyond that, Scripture lays no burden on anyone's shoulders. But, thank God, His own Word assures us that Scripture is fully sufficient to bring us to salvation and to equip us spiritually for all that God demands of us.

No man, no church, no religious authority has any warrant from God to augment the inspired Word of Scripture with additional traditions, or to alter the plain sense of it by subjecting it to the rigors of a "traditional" meaning not found in the Word itself. To do so is clearly to invalidate the Word of God—and we know what our Lord thinks of that (Matthew 15:6-9).

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