

Grace to You :: Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

Scripture, Tradition, and Rome, Part 1

Scripture: Exodus 24:4-7; Exodus 34:27; Deuteronomy 4:2; Deuteronomy 12:32; Deuteronomy 31:9; Joshua 1:7-8; Proverbs 30:5-6; Isaiah 8:20; Matthew 15:3; Mark 7:6-13

Code: A244

The tendency to venerate tradition is very strong in religion. The world is filled with religions that have been following set traditions for hundreds—even thousands—of years. Cultures come and go, but religious tradition shows an amazing continuity.

In fact, many ancient religions—including Druidism, Native American religions, and several of the oriental cults—eschewed written records of their faith, preferring to pass down their legends and rituals and dogmas via word-of-mouth. Such religions usually treat their body of traditions as a *de facto* authority equal to other religions' sacred writings.

Even among the world's religions that revere sacred writings, however, tradition and Scripture are often blended. This is true in Hinduism, for example, where the ancient Vedas are the Scriptures, and traditions handed down by gurus round out the faith of most followers. Tradition in effect becomes a lens through which the written word is interpreted. Tradition therefore stands as the highest of all authorities, because it renders the only authoritative interpretation of the sacred writings.

This tendency to view tradition as supreme authority is not unique to pagan religions. Traditional Judaism, for example, follows the Scripture-plus-tradition paradigm. The familiar books of the Old Testament alone are viewed as Scripture, but true orthodoxy is actually defined by a collection of ancient rabbinical traditions known as the Talmud. In effect, the traditions of the Talmud carry an authority equal to or greater than that of the inspired Scriptures.

Teaching as Doctrines the Precepts of Men

This is no recent development within Judaism. The Jews of Jesus' day also placed tradition on an equal footing with Scripture. Rather, in effect, they made tradition superior to Scripture, because Scripture was interpreted by tradition and therefore made subject to it.

Whenever tradition is elevated to such a high level of authority, it inevitably becomes detrimental to the authority of Scripture. Jesus made this very point when he confronted the Jewish leaders. He showed that in many cases their traditions actually nullified Scripture. He therefore rebuked them in the harshest terms:

"Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." He was also saying to them, "You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death'; but you say, 'If a man says to his father or his mother, anything of mine you

might have been helped by is Corban (that is to say, given to God),' you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that" (Mark 7:6-13).

It was inexcusable that tradition would be elevated to the level of Scripture in Judaism, because when God gave the law to Moses, it was in written form for a reason: to make it permanent and inviolable. The Lord made very plain that the truth He was revealing was not to be tampered with, augmented, or diminished in any way. His Word was the final authority in all matters: "You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you" (Deuteronomy 4:2).

They were to observe His commandments assiduously, and neither supplement nor abrogate them by any other kind of "authority": "Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it" (Deuteronomy 12:32).

So the revealed Word of God, and nothing else, was the supreme and sole authority in Judaism. This alone was the standard of truth delivered to them by God Himself. Moses was instructed to write down the very words God gave him (Exodus 34:27), and that written record of God's Word became the basis for God's covenant with the nation (Exodus 24:4,7). The written Word was placed in the Ark of the Covenant (Deuteronomy 31:9), symbolizing its supreme authority in the lives and the worship of the Jews forever. God even told Moses' successor, Joshua:

Be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it (Joshua 1:7-8).

Of course, other books of inspired Scripture beside those written by Moses were later added to the Jewish canon—but this was a prerogative reserved by God alone. *Sola Scriptura* was therefore established in principle with the giving of the law. No tradition passed down by word of mouth, no rabbinical opinion, and no priestly innovation was to be accorded authority equal to the revealed Word of God as recorded in Scripture.

Solomon understood this principle: "Every word of God is tested; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him. Do not add to His words lest He reprove you, and you be proved a liar" (Proverbs 30:5-6).

The Scriptures therefore were to be the one standard by which everyone who claimed to speak for God was tested: "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:20, KJV).

In short, tradition had no legitimate place of authority in the worship of Jehovah.

Everything was to be tested by the Word of God as recorded in the Scriptures. That's why Jesus' rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees was so harsh. Their very faith in Rabbinical tradition was in and of itself a serious transgression of the covenant and commandments of God (cf. Matthew 15:3).

The Rise and Ruin of Catholic Tradition

Unfortunately, Christianity has often followed the same tragic road as paganism and Judaism in its tendency to elevate tradition to a position of authority equal to or greater than Scripture. The Catholic Church in particular has its own body of tradition that functions exactly like the Jewish Talmud: it is the standard by which Scripture is to be interpreted. In effect, tradition supplants the voice of Scripture itself.

How did this happen? The earliest Church Fathers placed a strong emphasis on the authority of Scripture over verbal tradition. Fierce debates raged in the early church over such crucial matters as the deity of Christ, His two natures, the Trinity, and the doctrine of original sin. Early church councils settled those questions by appealing to Scripture as the highest of all authorities. The councils themselves did not merely issue *ex cathedra* decrees, but they reasoned things out by Scripture and made their rulings accordingly. The authority was in the appeal to Scripture, not in the councils *per se*.

Unfortunately, the question of Scriptural authority itself was not always clearly delineated in the early church, and as the church grew in power and influence, church leaders began to assert an authority that had no basis in Scripture. The church as an institution became in many people's eyes the fountain of authority and the arbiter on all matters of truth. Appeals began to be made more often to tradition than to Scripture. As a result, extrabiblical doctrines were canonized and a body of truth that found no support in Scripture began to be asserted as infallibly true.

Roman Catholic doctrine is shot through with legends and dogmas and superstitions that have no biblical basis whatsoever. The stations of the cross, the veneration of saints and angels, the Marian doctrines such as the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption, and the notion that Mary is co-mediatrix with Christ—none of those doctrines can be substantiated by Scripture. They are the product of Roman Catholic tradition.

Officially, the Catholic Church is very straightforward about her blending of Scripture and tradition. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) acknowledges that the Roman Catholic Church "does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence" (CCC 82, emphasis added).

Tradition, according to Roman Catholicism, is therefore as much "the Word of God" as Scripture. According to the *Catechism*, Tradition and Scripture "are bound closely together and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal" (CCC 80). The "sacred deposit of faith"—this admixture of Scripture and tradition—was supposedly entrusted by the apostles to their successors (CCC 84), and "The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone. . . . This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome" (CCC 85).

The Catechism is quick to deny that this makes the Church's teaching authority (called the magisterium) in any way superior to the Word of God itself (CCC 86). But it then goes on to warn the

faithful that they must "read the Scripture within 'the living tradition of the whole Church'" (CCC 113). The Catechism at this point quotes "a saying of the Fathers[:] Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church's heart rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word" (CCC 113).

So in effect, tradition is not only made equal to Scripture; but it becomes the true Scripture, written not in documents, but mystically within the Church herself. And when the Church speaks, Her voice is heard as if it were the voice of God, giving the only true meaning to the words of the "documents and records. "Thus tradition utterly supplants and supersedes Scripture.

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