

God's Word versus Men's Traditions

“Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”
—*Colossians 2:8*

JESUS WAS VERY OUT-spoken in condemning the “tradition of the elders” as set forth by the scribes and the Pharisees of his day. He was asked by them why his disciples transgressed these traditions, and his reply was, in part, “Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?” (Matt. 15:2,3) Thus Jesus indicates that the traditions of men are often contrary to the commandment, or Word of God.

Webster's Dictionary gives as one definition of tradition: “The delivery of opinions, doctrines, practices, rites, and customs from ancestors to posterity; the transmission of any opinions or practice from forefathers to descendants by oral communication.” This thought is in sharp contrast to the Scriptures,

in which it is made clear that religious doctrines, practices, and rites come only by the direct instruction of God, or through his specially chosen instruments. In the New Testament, the word translated “tradition”—the practice Jesus condemned—is the Greek word *paradosis*. According to Prof. Strong, this word specifically has reference to “the Jewish traditionary law.”

The “Jewish traditionary law” was that mass of interpretations and adjustments which began to be formulated by the elders of Israel at an early date, and which was transmitted orally and added to from generation to generation. So far as we know there were no written versions of these traditions in Jesus’ day. It was in the second century that these oral traditions began to be put into written form. Out of these written versions of tradition there finally developed the Jewish Talmud. However, not all Israelites shared the views of the scribes and Pharisees with respect to tradition. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote:

“What I would now explain is this, that the Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the laws of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees reject them, and say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers.”

CONTROVERSY CONTINUES

The controversy as to the relative value of the written Word of God and the tradition of men,

which began in ancient times and was highlighted by Jesus' firm stand against tradition, has continued to our day. One of the crucial issues today confronting many of the large denominations of Christendom is whether or not their traditions should be given equal authority with the written Word of God in their teachings. As church leaders deal with this, the necessity arises of perhaps even setting aside the Word of God in some cases, where it conflicts with their long-held traditions.

As shown by our theme scripture, the Apostle Paul, in the days of the Early Church, found it necessary to counsel the brethren to resist the influence of tradition. The traditions Paul spoke of that were "not after Christ" and which wrought the greatest harm during that time were likely those related to false notions concerning the place the Jewish Law should occupy in the beliefs and practices of Christians.

The Apostle Peter wrote, "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers." (I Pet. 1:18) Here, Peter emphasizes that neither the world's wealth nor the foolish conduct enjoined upon them by the traditions received from their fathers had purchased their redemption, but they were redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ."—vs. 19

In Galatians 1:14, Paul speaks of his former zeal for the traditions of his fathers. We quote: "[I] profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers." Now, however, Paul was zealous only for the Gospel of

Christ, and this zeal was even greater than it had previously been for tradition.

As we have noted, the word “tradition” simply implies the passing along of ideas to others by word of mouth. Thus, the word itself does not suggest anything necessarily evil. Paul, in fact, uses it in reference to his own teachings of the Gospel. He says, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.” (II Thess. 2:15) Here Paul uses the Greek word translated “traditions” as applying to his own inspired teachings which he had passed on to the brethren by word of mouth and by letter. However, since Paul spoke and wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, his teachings were a part of God’s message to his people, and not the opinions of men.

Paul also used the word “tradition” in a good sense in II Thessalonians 3:6, which reads, “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us.” Here again the “tradition” Paul refers to is his own teachings, and therefore inspired by God’s Holy Spirit.

HUMAN TRADITIONS

The traditions condemned by Jesus and the apostles are those of purely human origin. The specific traditions with which they dealt at that time pertained to the Law. Today there are many philosophies pertaining to the Gospel of Christ which have developed throughout the centuries,

and which eventually have become accepted by many as of equal importance to the Word of God. As the definition of the word implies, these traditions started as opinions which were passed along to others orally, sometimes over many generations. Finally they achieved dignity and a semblance of authority by being published in written form.

However, human tradition, unsupported by the teachings of the Bible, no matter how old, how venerable, or how seemingly reasonable, should be given no authority by the dedicated child of God and sincere student of the Bible. The Lord's true people will only give heed to the instructions of his Word, which states, "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."—Isa. 8:20

THOROUGHLY FURNISHED

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, saying, "All Scripture, divinely inspired, is indeed profitable for Teaching, for Conviction, for Correction, for that Discipline which is in Righteousness; so that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly fitted for Every good Work." (II Tim. 3:16,17, *Wilson's Emphatic Diaglott*) Here the Apostle Paul clearly emphasizes that the Lord's people need not look outside the Word of God for authoritative instructions in order to be acceptable servants to the Lord.

Paul again wrote to Timothy, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (II Tim. 2:15) To be workmen pleasing to God, it is essential only that we rightly

divide the Word of truth and apply its precepts in our lives as we daily walk in the narrow way of sacrifice. It is not necessary to harmonize the Word of God with traditions. Some traditions may be quite in harmony with the Word of God, but most traditions are not, and these should give us no concern in our “rightly dividing the word of truth.”

SMALL BEGINNINGS

Traditions usually have small beginnings. The doctrine of the trinity is a humanly conceived tradition. There is no authority for this teaching in the Word of God. To the one who first gave thought to this erroneous doctrine it probably seemed to be a reasonable conclusion. Certainly the Bible speaks of God the Father, and it also speaks of Jesus, his beloved Son. The Bible also speaks much about the Holy Spirit of God.

Could it be, someone may have inquired, that these three are in some way the same? This seed of philosophy was possibly passed on to others, and then to still others. Finally, it was debated in church councils and accepted by the majority as fact. Many of those who fought against it, insisting that the Bible taught that there is but one God, were pacified by the suggestion that “these three are one.” This tradition has become so deeply rooted in the minds of millions that to question it makes one disobedient, in their minds, to the Word of God. Yet, it is not taught in the Bible at all. Rather, this tradition makes void the teaching of the Word of God that “there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, . . . and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things.” (I Cor. 8:6) It also makes the Holy Spirit

a “ghost” instead of the holy power or influence of God, as the Bible teaches.—Acts 1:8, *Rotherham Translation*

Many other traditions developed during the Dark Ages. Among them is the teaching that the end of the world means the destruction of the earth by literal fire. On the contrary, the Bible teaches that the end of the world is the end of an age—the end of Satan’s kingdom, the present evil social order—and is brought about to prepare the way for the establishment of Messiah’s kingdom. Recognizing this enables us to have a much clearer understanding of the end-of-the-world prophecies than otherwise would be possible. God assures us in his Word, “Thus saith the LORD that created the heavens; God himself that formed the earth and made it; he hath established it, he created it not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited.” “The earth abideth for ever.”—Isa. 45:18; Eccles. 1:4

Then there is the “immortal soul” tradition. This false idea began very early in man’s experience, when Satan said to mother Eve, “Ye shall not surely die.” (Gen. 3:4) As this tradition developed it took the form that “there is no death.” Then the “reasonable conclusion” was reached that since actual death is not the punishment for sin, some form of conscious punishment must await those who only “seem” to die. This idea, thought by many to be so reasonable, soon developed into the God-dishonoring doctrine of eternal torture in a fiery hell. How this tradition has indeed made void the Word of God with respect to its simple statements that “the soul that sinneth, it shall die,” that “the wages of sin is death,” but that God has a loving

provision for everlasting life through Jesus Christ our Lord!—Ezek. 18:4; Rom. 6:23; John 3:16

INFALLIBILITY

As the great falling away from the faith foretold by the Apostle Paul developed, the tendency grew to impart authority to certain outstanding leaders in the church. The bishop of Rome received the largest share of this authority. In due course, it seemed reasonable to his supporters to confer infallibility upon him and to regard him as the vicerent of Christ, that is, in place of Christ. This tradition soon became a church-approved doctrine, but it has no support whatever in the Word of God.

The only truly infallible teachings, so far as the humble Christian is concerned, are those contained in the written Word of God. God has so overruled the matter that, as Paul declared, the Scriptures given by inspiration are sufficient to make one wise unto salvation. We know that it is in the providence of God that he has seen to it that his Word of truth has come down to us in written form. It does not depend upon oral transmission, as is true with the beginning of all traditions. Oral testimony can be forgotten, distorted, or wrested, but not the written Word of God.

True, we do not have the original manuscripts of the Bible, as written by those who were inspired by God. We have to depend upon translations, which at times are less than perfect. Today, however, in the Lord's providence, we have Greek and Hebrew concordances and lexicons which enable us to check the accuracy of translations. These helps are available in printed form as well as in computer

software versions. This has proved to be a great blessing to the Lord's people, and has resulted in a clearer and more blessed understanding of God's great plan of salvation.

Revelation 22:18,19 contains a warning against adding to or taking away from the Word of God. While this warning applies particularly to the Book of Revelation, without doubt God is equally concerned with respect to his entire written Word. He wants his people to be meek and humble in their approach to his Word. When he speaks, he rejoices to have his people take heed to what he says and to order their lives accordingly. This is one of the vital tests the Lord imposes upon all his consecrated people. They have dedicated themselves to do his will, and his will is expressed through his written Word. Are we truly following that Word, or are we in part giving heed to the precepts and traditions of men?

THE NOBLE BEREANS

The Apostle Paul was one of the inspired servants of God who was used greatly in helping to provide his written Word to those in the Early Church. Paul rejoiced when he met those who insisted that even his teachings be tested as to their harmony with the inspired Scriptures already written. He indicates this in telling of his experiences with a group in a synagogue in Berea to whom he presented the Gospel. He said of these that they "were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."—Acts 17:11

In addition to searching the Scriptures for proof of what Paul preached to them, these Bereans were

noble also in the fact that they received the Word of God “with all readiness of mind.” This is an important quality for all those who would be pleasing to the Heavenly Father. The disposition to turn a deaf ear to clear statements of the Word of God, and to be guided instead by human philosophy and tradition, cannot be pleasing to the Lord. Let us endeavor to be among those who “tremble” reverently at his Word.—Isa. 66:5

HELPERS

The Lord, in his providence, has provided that his people should assist each other in the understanding of the sacred and infallible Word of truth. We all have opportunities and responsibilities along this line. The Apostle Paul speaks that some of the brethren may serve as teachers, some as evangelists, and some as pastors. (Eph. 4:11) In this regard, the Lord in his love provided a special servant for his people in this Harvest period of the Gospel Age, for which we are duly grateful.

Throughout the Gospel Age, the oral and written assistance to the church provided by these helpers occupies a different position than do the writings contained directly in the inspired Word of God. These helpers are not, nor have they ever claimed to be, the sources of truth with respect to the divine plan. Rather, they have served to call attention to the glorious doctrines of present truth as they are set forth in the inspired Word. If Paul, although an inspired apostle, considered the Bereans to be noble because they made sure that what he taught them was supported by the infallible Scriptures, how much more important it is for us to make sure that

what we are taught by those not inspired, as was Paul, is indeed supported by a “thus saith the Lord.”

SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATIONS

Speaking of the experiences of natural Israel, the Apostle Paul wrote, “Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world [ages, *WED*] are come.” (I Cor. 10:11) Some have taken this statement by Paul to mean that everything which happened to Israel is supposed to have a very deep significance which does not appear on the surface. Then they proceed to interpret these supposedly deep types according to whatever their opinions may indicate to be the meaning.

This is an unwarranted use of the Word of God. Paul clearly indicated what he meant by saying that the things which happened to Israel were examples. He explains that God dealt with all his ancient people in the same manner. Some responded to his providences in terms of faithful obedience, but others did not. They were “ensamples,” either good or bad, by how they responded. He wrote, “With many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as

some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer.”—vss. 5-10

Then follows the explanation already quoted that “all these things happened unto them for ensamples.” God permitted those things to happen to natural Israel in order to provide “ensamples,” or lessons, to his people of later times not to be disobedient as some of his people of old were disobedient. These lessons apply to the Lord’s people of today, those living at the “end of the age,” just as Paul expresses in this verse.

Many numbers and figures are mentioned in various parts of the Bible. Some have assumed that these are all intended in some way to be prophecies or to have special, deep, significance. As a result, many have disappointed themselves and others by their interpretations of these so-called prophetic “deep things,” which have not come to pass as they were once supposed. Although most often rightly intended, this is an unwise use of the Word of God. There are indeed wonderful and beautiful prophecies in the Bible, but the Bible itself identifies these as such, and gives us the proper keys for unlocking them. We must also remember that no prophecy can be fully understood in every detail until it is fulfilled. Paul wisely and humbly said, “Now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”—I Cor. 13:12

THE FUNDAMENTALS

All the great fundamentals of the divine plan are clearly established in the Word of God by direct statements of Scripture. If we rightly divide the Word of

truth we will discover the firm foundation upon which present truth is established. If, however, we try to harmonize these truths with opinions and traditions which are based merely on human philosophy, we will sooner or later experience disappointment, no matter how appealing the philosophy may be.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised.)" (Heb. 10:23) God is always faithful to his promises, but he takes no responsibility for the theories we may attach to his promises. We will never be disappointed when putting our faith in the promises of God, but could well be disappointed if we fail to see the difference between the promises of God and those theories and traditions which we may unwittingly associate with his promises. May the Word of God, and all the blessed features of the divine plan which are clearly revealed therein, become more and more precious to us as the days and years go by! ■