

Scripture And Tradition

By R. Thomas Zell

This article is available as a printed booklet from Conciliar Media, a department of the Antiochian Archdiocese, as part of their popular series of attractive and informative booklets and brochures about the basic teachings of the ancient Orthodox Christian faith. This essay is copyrighted by Conciliar Press.

- The Bible says once someone accepts Christ, he can never lose his salvation. All true Christians have eternal security.
- The Bible says it is possible to fall away from grace. Even believers can turn away from God and be forever lost in their sins.
- The Bible says homosexuality is a perversion of God's moral law and a deviation from natural human behavior.
- The Bible says homosexuality is morally acceptable; it is a lifestyle as viable as any "traditional" concept of marriage or family.
- The Bible says long ago God predestined some men and women to everlasting life, and some to ever-lasting judgment. We are not free to accept or reject His salvation.
- The Bible says God Himself does not know who will choose Him. Salvation is a matter of free will. The decision is entirely up to us.
- The Bible says Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God the Father, sharing fully in His divinity, and indivisibly united with the Holy Trinity.
- The Bible says Jesus Christ is a created being. He is superior to the angels, but not eternal and not of the same nature as the Father.
- The Bible says we should no longer use the terms "Father" and "Son" in relation to God. They are merely symbolic and were meant to be replaced with less sexist terminology.
- The Bible says ... Wait a minute!

How can so many contradictory statements be based on the teachings of one book? How can intelligent and sensible people read basically the same Old and New Testament text, yet arrive at such opposite conclusions? Is there any other book, ancient or modern, which has prompted such a vast and often incompatible array of interpretations and dogmas? Why can't anyone agree on what the Bible really teaches?

I believe the time has come for those who love the Holy Scriptures, no matter what their backgrounds may be, to address such questions earnestly and sincerely in the name of Christ. No one who takes seriously Christ's High Priestly Prayer for unity among His followers in John 17:20, 21 ("I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me") can look with indifference upon the divisions, factions, and schisms which have become synonymous with contemporary Christianity. Nor can we ignore the crisis of biblical interpretation which is bringing so much of that division upon us.

In the Roman Catholic Church of the late twentieth century, an increasingly vocal and powerful contingent of theologians, clergy, and laity began to cry out for changes far more radical than those of the Reformation. Calling into question Church teachings concerning the most basic issues of morality, ethics, and traditional Church dogma, and fanned by the turbulent winds of nineteenth and early twentieth century liberalism, and furthered by a highly militant feminism, these factions tore away at the very core of traditional Catholic beliefs. What effect these forces will have in shaping Church doctrine in the twenty-first century remains to be seen.

In the Protestant world, what began as an attempt by early reformers such as Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli to purify the Church has now largely failed to lead God's people to doctrinal purity and biblical fidelity. Rather, it has resulted all too often in a narrow-minded and independent sectarianism on the one hand, or a progressive descent towards novel and often unrecognizably Christian liberalism on the other. Both elements now simultaneously wage war upon the modern Protestant Church and have cast her onto the shores of the twenty-first century divided, confused, and disoriented. While there are still many who cling faithfully to the essentials of their particular denomination, severe structural cracks are now becoming apparent everywhere. Should the Protestant Church survive the twenty-first century, many fear to think what appearance it will have assumed?

Never before in the history of the Christian Faith has there been such widespread confusion concerning foundational biblical doctrines such as the nature of the Church, the Holy Trinity, or the essence of the Christian life. Having lost a consistent approach to biblical interpretation, modern Christianity has been cut adrift from its moorings, and now appears to be rapidly drifting out to a tempestuous sea of subjectivity, shallowness, and heretical novelty. Like the disciples of Jesus' day who could not cast out the demons, modern Christianity has seemingly been outwitted and overpowered by the enemy. Divided and confused, it is rapidly losing its momentum, while the watching world either mocks openly, or begins to look elsewhere for answers. What Happened?

If, for the most part, Christians are sincerely looking to the Scriptures for answers, yet are coming up with a discordant array of interpretations, there must be some explanation. I believe there is one and only one-but before discussing it, I would like to mention two commonly held views, which though understandable in light of the current chaotic scene, I believe must be rejected at the outset.

1) Unhealthy Skepticism. Some would say Christians disagree over the proper interpretation of Scripture because there is no proper interpretation. These people would claim, "The Bible is not divinely inspired and has no unified message." Frankly, who can blame people for being skeptical? With over 22,000 different Christian denominations and sects in existence today, and with an average of five new groups appearing each week, almost all claiming to base their beliefs on the teachings of the Bible, how could it not appear to those outside the Christian Faith that the Scriptures have no unity, no underlying theme, and no divinely inspired message?

To the skeptic, the spectacle of modern Christian-ity proves that the Bible is simply another book of history, a random collection of religious writings re-reflecting the sociological development of a portion of Middle Eastern culture. I obviously don't agree with that position, but in deference must admit that if I were on the outside looking in at all this chaos, I might be tempted to believe it. If you are reading this booklet as a skeptic, but one who would like to believe there is more to the message of the Bible than what you might have experienced so far, I wish to encourage you not to give up. There is more to the story-much more. Please, keep reading!

2) Unhealthy Optimism. Others would tell us that although Christians disagree over the meaning of Scripture, in the final analysis, doctrine is not really important anyway. They would look upon the current disharmony among Christians as not a weakness, but a strength-God's way of teaching us that what a person believes, or how someone interprets the Bible, is only a matter of personal, private opinion, and ultimately has little importance or bearing on one's relationship with God or fellow man. This view says, "Our responsibility is to make the best of whatever we have, to respect everyone else's opinion, and not to prefer our views, or anyone else's views, over our neighbor's. It doesn't really matter whether someone is Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Christian Scientist, fundamental-ist, or Unitarian. We should simply live our lives, and stop trying to find out who is 'right.'" This view is incompatible with a sincere search for truth. Looking for Answers

All right, perhaps we are in agreement, at least in principle, that there is a serious crisis here. There can be no denying that the spectacle we modern Christians are presenting to the outside world bears very little resemblance to the picture of unity and oneness envisioned by Christ in John 17. The most sincere efforts of Christian biblical interpreters, no matter how intelligent, how charismatic, how gifted in biblical languages, how well-loved, or how eloquent, have not been sufficient to quell the confusion that now exists. In fact, most of them have only added to this confusion in their own way. Sectarianism, liberalism, and moral decay are running rampant, and at the present rate of decline, there will likely be no resemblance whatsoever between the Christianity we now hold, and Christianity one hundred years from now. (If you have been a Christian for many years, think back to the changes which have occurred in your own church since you were a child in Sunday School!)

Okay, so where do we go from here?

What I am about to say, I say with more conviction and firmness of belief than I have possessed in over thirty years as a student of the Scriptures. I wish to give a two-word answer to that question which represents what I unequivocally believe to be the one and only prospect for Christians who wish to return to the true message of Scripture and to understand its divine meaning. Apart from this priceless key to interpretation, the fragmentation we see around us will continue unabated until finally there is nothing left of the original Christian proclamation.

What I'm about to give you is not just another opinion or idea. It is our only hope! It's called Holy Tradition. You Must Be Kidding!

"Tradition? Isn't that something the Catholics came up with to impose a system of non-biblical, authoritarian dogmas upon people so that they wouldn't read the Bible for themselves?"

If that statement sounds anywhere close to where you are coming from, please stay with me for at least the next few pages of this booklet. There are reasons why you feel that way, and some of them are valid. But not all of them. What I am about to say is not an indictment of godly pastors, teachers, parents, or friends who in sincerity taught you and me our beliefs about tradition. I was raised in the Baptist Church and in a godly Christian home, and have the greatest respect for those who taught me and sought to be examples of how to serve God and to put Him first in life. I love them, and I thank God for them.

But they only saw a part of the picture. Holy Tradition: A Bad Rap

No one can deny that there is a dangerous and dark side to tradition. It does not take a Ph.D. in biblical studies to be aware of the harsh language used in Scripture

against the legalistic and man-centered traditions of the Pharisees, or the other empty traditions filtering around during the New Testament era, against which Saint Paul warns his readers to be on guard (Colossians 2:8).

Undoubtedly some of the most harsh language in all Scripture directed toward this aspect of tradition can be found coming from the mouth of Jesus Christ Himself in Matthew 15:3-9. He calls the Pharisees "hypocrites" for nullifying the commandments of God through their phony traditions, and then goes on to castigate them by quoting Isaiah's prophecy,

"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."

What Christian in his or her right mind would want to be involved with something that received such harsh treatment from our Lord Himself!

But wait! Are we seeing the whole picture? Because something can be misused and abused, does that necessarily mean it cannot possibly be used in a proper manner? Take, for instance, the Bible itself. As we will soon see, godless heretics from the earliest period of the Church's history, as well as virtually every heretical cult of our own day, use or have used the Bible as their source of proof-texts. Does this mean that we should shun the Holy Scriptures as many people shun Holy Tradition, because the possibility of misuse exists? I hardly think so!

To be quite honest, the Bible, while deprecating the dark side of tradition—that is, the tradition of men—speaks quite highly concerning tradition properly applied. Saint Paul, who in Colossians 2:8 warns his readers against the one aspect of tradition, applauds the Corinthian believers for keeping the traditions he delivered to them concerning conduct in Church worship (1 Corinthians 11:2). Elsewhere, he strongly exhorts believers to

"stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle" (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

Further on in that same book, he applies tradition to moral conduct in a favorable light when he says,

"We command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us" (2 Thessalonians 3:6).

What am I trying to say? That tradition, like the Bible itself, can be perverted and twisted into something unimaginably ugly and godless, if that is the intent of those who are using it. But if we as modern Christians have false preconceptions that go beyond that realization, and tell us that all tradition is evil, or that tradition is something to be avoided like the plague, we need to take a second look at Scripture itself. As we will soon see, the early Church had no such hang-ups about tradition—although Christians were most definitely concerned about differentiating between Holy Tradition and the traditions of men.

The Church followed Saint Paul's instruction to Timothy,

"the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2).

The word tradition means, literally, "to hand down."

Holy Tradition speaks of a careful passing on of correct belief and worship from generation to generation. I will tip my hand before moving into the next section by saying here that if the early Church had not been able to come to grips with tradition properly applied, and if the decay of our own day and age had spun out of control in the early history of Christianity, without the safeguard of Holy Tradition to keep the Church from slipping headlong into heresy, we would not have needed a Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Why? Because Christianity would have died in its infancy, wracked and torn apart by conflicting doctrines and perversions. The Church would have blown away like dust long before Martin Luther came onto the scene. Or at best, he would have needed way more than 95 Theses to get things straightened out! But Isn't the Bible Sufficient By Itself?

Okay, how about another question, and a very valid one at that, which is often brought up in discussions about tradition. Isn't the Bible sufficient in and of itself without needing any help? What about the doctrine of sola scriptura?

To answer that question, I would like to introduce you to one of my favorite heroes from the Church's past. His name is Saint Vincent of Lerins, and he lived and wrote in the fifth century. Like us, he had a deep and enduring love of the Holy Scriptures. (Isn't it a shame we modern Christians so easily assume that we are the only ones to have an interest in God's Word?) Listen for a moment to his discussion of how to determine true doctrine:

I have often earnestly approached learned and holy men who knew Christian doctrine, asking how I can distinguish the truth of the catholic (universal) Faith from the falsehood of heresy. In almost every instance, they have told me that if I, or anyone else, want to detect heresy, avoid the traps set by heretics, and maintain the true Faith, I must, with the help of

the Lord, reinforce my own belief with two things:

- 1) The authority of the Holy Scriptures;
- 2) The tradition of the Church.

At this point someone may wish to ask, "Since the canon of Scripture is complete and more than sufficient, what need is there to join the authority of the Church's interpretation to it?" Good question. But there is a simple answer we all know if we think a moment: Because of the depth of the Scriptures, they are not interpreted in the same sense by everyone. One understands a text to mean one thing, and another thinks it means another. Sometimes it seems there are as many interpretations as there are interpreters.... Consequently, because of the intricacies of all these heresies and incorrect doctrines, we must formulate our understanding of the writings of the Apostles and prophets in harmony with the standards of ecclesiastical and orthodox interpretation. (From The Commentaries, chapter 2, paraphrased by Fr. Jack N. Sparks).

Aside from the fact that this passage is so relevant to our contemporary scene it could have been written yesterday, Saint Vincent's work is vitally important because it so perfectly summarizes the need for tradition in the earlier period of the Church-earlier that is, even than Saint Vincent. It was because of the countless heresies seeking to pervert the Scriptures that Holy Tradition became so important! Early "Scriptural" Heresies

Let's take a few steps farther back in time, starting in the first century, and listen to just a few of the heresies which started attacking the Church from her earliest times. To understand these heresies is to understand why the Church, from its inception, placed such a high degree of emphasis upon the role of Holy Tradition.

- In the first century, the Cerinthians, a heretical cult, taught that the world was formed out of pre-existent matter, possibly by angels. Jesus began His life as a mere man; the divine power descended upon Him at His baptism, and left Him before the crucifixion.
- Also in the first century, the Ebionites taught that Jesus was only the son of Joseph and Mary. The Holy Spirit came upon Him at, but not prior to, His baptism.
- In the second century, the Gnostics came into prominence. They taught a wide array of philosophical and pseudo-Christian doctrines, saying, among other things, that there was a distinction between the God who created matter, and the supreme and unknowable Divine Being. The world was therefore imperfect and unspiritual. True knowledge of God could only be obtained through mystical "gnosis" or knowledge.
- Also in the second century, the Marcionites taught that the God of the Old Testament was different from the God of the New Testament. Jesus, who didn't really have a physical, human body, came to overthrow this cruel god of law and violence.
- In the third century, the Novatians, a harsh and legalistic sect, taught, in part, that the human soul was pre-existent, and that Jesus' soul was united to Jesus, the Word, somewhere in time prior to His human incarnation.
- Also in the third century, Sabellius taught that the Godhead did not consist of three distinct Persons, but that there was only a succession of modes or operations of one Person.
- In the fourth century, the infamous heretic Arius taught that the Son was not equal to or of the same substance as the Father.

What a mess! And that is only to name portions of the teachings of just a few early heresies. Other than the fact that some of these groups differed as to what books they believed composed the Old and New Testament, do you know one thing they all had in common? Just like the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses of our day, they all claimed adamantly that these misbegotten views were the true teaching of Scripture! Setting the Record Straight

Thank God, from the earliest period of the Church, going right back to the Apostles themselves, the true heroes of our Faith fought tooth and nail against such perversions. No one, not a single one of them, believed that the Bible needed additional help to somehow become God's Word. In view of the countless heresies attacking the Church from the beginning, all of them using Scripture to make their claims more palatable (in Saint Vincent's words, heretics sprinkle the perfume of heavenly language upon their doctrines, because they are "quite aware that the evil smell of their doctrines will never be accepted if their nasty vapors are released undisguised"), it was sincere Christians who needed the help-desperately. There had to be some way to distinguish truth from error in those crucially formative years of the Church. One thing wouldn't work, for sure: letting everyone draw his own conclusions about what the Bible really meant!

One of the earliest and most important "yard-sticks" the early Christians used to determine precisely the core essentials of true doctrine was their baptismal formulations. What was it that catechumens coming for Christian baptism were proclaiming they believed? In the face of all that wrong doctrine, what were the essentials of the Church's saving and biblical Faith? Baptismal formulations-concise, carefully worded statements of faith (such as the Apostle's Creed, whose roots go back to the second century) -became one of the earliest forms of tradition. They were the Church's way of protecting new catechumens who came seeking salvation in Christ. Because of these baptismal creeds, the Church was able to say, "These are the essentials of apostolic teaching. This is how true Christians understand the Scriptures

concerning vitally important points of belief. This is what you must believe to be a Christian."

I simply do not have time in the course of one short booklet to go into further depth concerning the history of tradition in the early Church. However, I will say that one of the most encouraging studies I have ever embarked upon in my entire life has been to examine the teachings of men like Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hilary of Poitiers, Athanasius, and Basil the Great concerning this subject. As one born "after the bomb," so to speak, someone whose only experience of biblical interpretation has been that of the contemporary din of conflicting and contradictory opinions, this study has been like discovering a sweet oasis in the midst of a parched desert. Finally, I have found godly men who agree on the essentials of interpretation!

I will also say by way of summary that for these men, and in fact for all the great heroes of the early Church, the Scriptures were never looked upon as something to be stripped away and interpreted in isolation from the Church. That is what the heretics did. For early Christians, the Bible was most naturally understood in the context of the Church, that community of believers, both living and departed, who believed, taught, and, most importantly, worshiped in accordance with what the Apostles had received from the Lord Himself. For early Christians, that kind of faithful tradition, that "Rule of Faith," was the interpretation of Scripture. The Make-Up of Tradition

The most important aspect of Holy Tradition, the New Testament, was still in its developmental stage throughout the entire period of the first century. The Holy Scriptures, God's infallible and unerring word delivered through the Apostles, stand alone and without rival. Orthodox theologian Bishop Kallistos Ware speaks for all Christendom when he says,

"The Bible is the supreme expression of God's revelation to man."

People from my evangelical background have bent over backwards to "hold fast" to this vital facet of Holy Tradition. A person could not consider himself to be evangelical if he did not read the Scriptures regularly, attend a Bible-believing Church where the Scriptures were both preached and practiced, and spend time meditating upon the message of Holy Writ.

And who among the early Fathers would disagree with that sentiment? Saint Jerome wrote that "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ." Saint Athanasius called those who neglect the Scriptures "worthy of utmost condemnation." And Saint John Chrysostom said that not knowing the Scriptures is "the cause of all evils."

But tragically, somewhere in the white-heat intensity of the "Battle for the Bible," many Christians have entirely overlooked the rest of Holy Tradition. Indeed, to badly misquote a verse in Acts, many evangelicals today would say in all honesty, "We have not even heard whether there is such a thing as Holy Tradition."

Besides the Scriptures, I've already mentioned one other important aspect of Holy Tradition, the early baptismal formulations. What are some of the other elements of tradition?

1) Councils and Creeds. As the Church grew and matured, the need often arose for local, regional, and even ecumenical universal-gatherings of orthodox pastors, bishops, theologians, and godly leaders, to establish true biblical and historical doctrine in answer to heretical claims of the day. They gathered to decide, again with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, what the Bible really taught about those issues. And to make sure that their decisions were really biblical, they made extreme efforts to follow the consistent teaching of the godly faithful who had gone before. By far the most important of the creeds coming out of these councils is the Nicene Creed (or more technically, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed), which is recited at every celebration of the Liturgy in the Orthodox Church. It states the absolute essentials of Christian Faith and belief as understood by the unified early Church.

2) The Liturgical Life of the Church. It is fascinating to read a later Church Father, Saint Basil (fourth century), as he defends biblical Orthodoxy against the pseudo-Biblicism of the Arians, who were masters at twisting Scripture. Of course, Saint Basil reasons from Scripture. But knowing the craftiness of his enemies, and how treacherous they were at proof-texting their absurd teachings, Saint Basil also invokes another powerful witness to, in this case, the true teaching concerning the Holy Spirit: the liturgical formulations-the patterns of worship-of the Church from her inception. "Do you want to know what Christians believe about something?" to paraphrase Saint Basil's argument. "Take a look at what they do and proclaim in their worship." When you stop to think about it, isn't it not only logical, but even a matter of piety, to believe that the same Holy Spirit who guided the writers of Scripture should also guide the Church in the development of her worship? The Church's liturgical and prayer life is a powerful element of Holy Tradition.

3) The Teaching of the Fathers and Lives of the Saints. I have never witnessed a martyr being tortured and killed for his or her faith. The early Church, however, had abundant opportunity to witness such spectacles. Is it any wonder that the writings of these martyrs, along with the writings of those who "fought the good fight" to the finish, who maintained true belief while others fell away, were looked upon with reverence and respect? Evangelicals today look to and trust respected Church leaders of our own era for sound Bible teaching and worthwhile instruction and edification. Why is it so difficult to give that kind of respect and honor to early heroes of the Faith-men and women who started, and finished the race? I wish that more of our "modern heroes" would do what all early Fathers and saints did to warrant the respect and

admiration of their followers: make absolutely sure that what they are teaching squares with what faithful Christians have believed throughout the years. To be a "hero" to someone, and to teach new and radically differing doctrine in the guise that this is what "the Bible says," is a cruel deception and a lie. G. K. Chesterton defined tradition as "giving your ancestors a vote."

4) Continuing Tradition. Also included under the banner of tradition could be mentioned, with varying degrees of importance and universality: the decisions of later councils, canon law, and finally the iconographic tradition of the Church. In fact, one of the most exciting things about tradition is that it never stops or remains static. Tradition is the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. We do not simply observe tradition, we enter into it, are swept up by it, and in the process become a part of its ebb and flow. Scripture and Tradition

For early Christians, there was no false dichotomy such as we see today between the Bible and Holy Tradition. In the intensity of unimaginably crucial battles for the Faith, when forces within and without were threatening to tear apart and silence forever the message proclaimed by Christ and passed down through His disciples, the Church looked gratefully to both Scripture and Holy Tradition to find balance and to maintain equilibrium. It was never an "either/or" option. Both Scripture and Holy Tradition were received as having been given to the Church by God Himself, the source of all wisdom, through the direct operation of the Holy Spirit.

The battles of our own era are no less fierce than those of the Church's early history. In the midst of a fragmented and hopelessly divided Christian proclamation of the early twenty-first century, with a myriad of groups and individuals claiming to know the true meaning of Scripture, yet disagreeing radically with one another and often proclaiming new and dangerously novel doctrines, the battle for faith is, in fact, intensifying on a daily basis. What will be the outcome of this tremendous struggle?

Thank God, there is still time for a return to the balanced and Spirit-filled understanding of the Holy Scriptures, as guided by the light of Holy Tradition. If we are willing to lay aside our modern prejudices and return to the consistent and clear message of the Bible, understood through the clarifying lens of Holy Tradition, our chances of surviving the current crisis increase tremendously. In fact, the very gates of hell will not prevail against us.

As the Bible says,

"Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work" (2 Thessalonians 2:15-17).

And God's people answered: AMEN!