

TRADITIONS OF MEN

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

In Matthew 15, the Pharisees were criticizing Jesus for not keeping the traditions of the Elders (men). Jesus in turn accused them of keeping the traditions of the elders, but breaking the commandments of God.

Question: "How should a Christian view tradition?"

Answer: The word tradition can have two meanings, one secular and one religious. The secular understanding is that tradition is a long-established ritual, custom, or belief that is passed down from one generation to the next. For example, families have certain traditions in the way they celebrate holidays, birthdays, or vacations. Family traditions can be a healthy and positive way to maintain family cohesiveness. Social traditions can help create a sense of belonging within a community. A school may have a tradition that each year the incoming freshmen are escorted to the first football game by the seniors. Following those traditions builds unity and helps maintain social norms. In the religious arena, however, tradition can blur the line between God's truth and man's invention, thereby confusing many. Christians should view religious tradition with caution.

Religious tradition was in full force during Jesus' earthly ministry. He often scolded the religious leaders, saying, "You nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down" (Mark 7:13). The scribes and the Pharisees had added so many of their own ideas to God's Law that the common people were confused and felt helpless to obey it all. In Mark 7:6–8, Jesus quoted from Isaiah to reprimand the religious leaders, saying, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'" Notice that the "commandments of men" were being taught as if they were divinely inspired "doctrines." And that was the problem.

One of the many traditions kept by the Pharisees of Jesus' day involved a ritualistic hand-washing before meals. The observance of this tradition had nothing to do with cleanliness; the Pharisees' concern was ceremonial purity. Once, when a Pharisee invited Jesus to eat with him, Jesus bypassed the tradition: "His host was amazed to see that he sat down to eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony required by Jewish custom" (Luke 11:38, NLT). Jesus had broken no law—nothing in the Mosaic commandments required such hand-washing—but the Pharisee expected conformity to the custom nonetheless. Jesus' outright disregard of that manmade tradition sets up a clear distinction between what is binding (God's commands) and what is not binding (human tradition).

Religious traditions that supersede or displace God's law have been around since the earliest days. They are still in full force within every religion as well as most Christian denominations. The liturgical branches of Christianity have the most obvious traditions, but more relaxed worship venues can have them as well. Most of us have our favorite style of music, method of preaching, organizational structure, and serving routines that we accept without question. When faced with change, we might even feel a sense of moral outrage, as though changing the service format or adding a bass guitar were a direct violation of God's commands. What we're really doing, perhaps without even realizing it, is guarding our own pet traditions, just as the Pharisees did. We can even become offended at Jesus, as the Pharisees did, when He disrupts our traditional view of what we think Christianity should look like (see John 9:16).

Scripture has layers of meaning. The more we delve into God's Word, the more we learn about God, and it often upsets our own ideas. Just when we think we have things figured out and we are certain that we are theologically, morally, and socially right about it all, we uncover another layer that shatters those confidences. When we cling to tradition—whether denominational, theological, or structural—as if it were God's Word, we keep the door closed on God's revelation of truth to us. He wants to keep surprising us with Who He is as we continue to pursue Him (Jeremiah 29:13). But religious tradition is often in the way. "That's not how we've always done it," is the battle cry of the traditionalists. Breaking tradition can be uncomfortable for many, just as it was for the Pharisees (Matthew 5:33–34; Luke 6:26–27). But when we can clearly see the dividing line between our own traditions and God's truth, we stay humble and pliable as God continues to transform us into the image of His Son (Romans 8:29).

Recommended Resource: *The Gospel According to Rome: Comparing Catholic Tradition and The Word of God* by James McCarthy

Question: "Should Catholic tradition have equal or greater authority than the Bible?"

Answer: Should church traditions be accepted as equally authoritative as Scripture? Or, should church traditions be followed only if they are in full agreement with Scripture? The answer to these questions plays a large role in determining what you believe and how you live as a Christian. It is our contention that Scripture alone is the only authoritative and infallible source for Christian doctrine and practice. Traditions are only valid if they are built on the firm foundation of Scripture and in full agreement with the entirety of Scripture. The following are seven biblical reasons supporting the teaching that the Bible should be accepted as the authority for faith and practice:

It is Scripture that is said to be God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16), and it is Scripture that has the repeated, "Thus saith the LORD..." In other words, it is the written Word that is repeatedly treated as God's Word. Never is it said of any church tradition that it, too, is God-breathed and infallible.

It is to Scripture that Jesus and the apostles appeal time after time in support or defense of their actions and teachings (Matthew 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31; Mark 12:10). There are over 60 verses in which you find "it is written..." used by Jesus and the apostles to support their teachings.

(3) It is to the Scriptures that the church is commended in order to combat the error that was bound to come (Acts 20:32). Likewise, it was the written Word that was seen in the Old Testament as the source of truth upon which to base one's life (Joshua 1:8; Deuteronomy 17:18-19; Psalm 1; Psalm 19:7-11; 119; etc.). Jesus said that one of the reasons that the Sadducees were in error concerning the resurrection is that they did not know the Scriptures (Mark 12:24).

(4) Infallibility is never stated as the possession of those who would become church leaders in succession of the apostles. In both the Old and New Testaments, it is seen that duly appointed religious leaders could cause the people of God to err (1 Samuel 2:27-36; Matthew 15:14; 23:1-7; John 7:48; Acts 20:30; Galatians 2:11-16). Both Testaments exhort people to study the Scriptures to determine what is true and what is false (Psalm 19; 119; Isaiah 8:20; 2 Timothy 2:15; 3:16-17). While Jesus taught respect toward religious leaders (Matthew 23:3), an admonition which the apostles followed, we have the apostles' example of breaking from the authority of their religious leaders when it was in opposition to what Jesus had commanded (Acts 4:19).

(5) Jesus equates the Scriptures with God's Word (John 10:35). In contrast, when it comes to the religious traditions, He condemns some traditions because they contradict the written Word (Mark 7:1-13). Never does Jesus use religious tradition to support His actions or teachings. Before the writing of the New Testament, the Old Testament was the only inspired Scripture. However, there were literally hundreds of Jewish "traditions" recorded in the Talmud (a collection of commentary compiled by Jewish rabbis). Jesus and the apostles had both the Old Testament, and the Jewish tradition. Nowhere in Scripture does Jesus or any of the apostles appeal to the Jewish traditions. In contrast, Jesus and the apostles quote from or allude to the Old Testament hundreds of times. The Pharisees accused Jesus and the apostles of "breaking the traditions" (Matthew 15:2). Jesus responded with a rebuke: "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?" (Matthew 15:3). The manner in which Jesus and the apostles distinguished between the Scriptures and tradition is an example for the church. Jesus specifically rebukes treating the "commandments of men" as doctrines (Matthew 15:9).

(6) It is Scripture that has the promise that it will never fail, that it will all be fulfilled. Again, never is this promise given to the traditions of the church (Psalm 119:89,152; Isaiah 40:8; Matthew 5:18; Luke 21:33).

(7) It is the Scriptures that are the instrument of the Holy Spirit and His means for conquering Satan and changing lives (Hebrews 4:12; Ephesians 6:17).

"And that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:15-17). "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:20).

According to 2 Timothy 3:15-17, it is Scripture that is able to give one knowledge of salvation, it is God-breathed, and it is what we need to be thoroughly equipped for every good work. To be "thoroughly" equipped, means that it has all that we need. Scripture contains the information from God that is all we need for salvation and to live a life of good works. According to Isaiah 8:20, it is the "law and testimony" (terms used to refer to Scripture, see Psalm 119) that is the standard by which to measure truth.

"Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the

synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" (Acts 17:10-11). Here the Jewish people of the town of Berea were commended for testing the teachings they were hearing from Paul by the Scriptures. They did not just accept Paul's words as authoritative. They examined Paul's words, compared them with Scripture, and found them to be true.

In Acts 20:27-32, Paul acknowledges publicly that "wolves" and false teachers would arise from "among yourselves" (within the church). What did he commend them to? To "God and the word of His grace." He does not commend them to the "church leaders" (they were the church leaders) nor to the traditions of the church nor to a particular overseeing elder. Rather, Paul pointed them to the Word of God.

In summary, while there is no one verse that states that the Bible alone is our authority, the Bible over and over again gives the examples and the admonitions of turning to the written Word as one's source of authority. When it comes to examining the origin of a prophet's or religious leader's teaching, it is Scripture that is appealed to as the standard.

The Roman Catholic Church uses a number of biblical passages to support their use of tradition as of equal weight with Scripture. Here are the most commonly used of these passages, along with a brief explanation:

"Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). "But 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). These passages relate to the traditions the Thessalonians had received from Paul himself, whether oral or written. They do not relate to traditions handed down, but to teachings that they themselves had received either from the mouth of Paul or from his pen. Paul is not giving his blessing on all tradition, but, rather, only on the traditions he had passed on to the Thessalonians. This is in contrast to the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church, which have been handed down from the fourth century and later, not from the mouth or pen of one of the apostles.

"These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:14-15). The phrase "pillar and ground of the truth" does not indicate that the church is the creator of truth, or that it can originate tradition to supplement Scripture. The church being the "pillar and ground of the truth" simply means that the church is the proclaimer and defender of the truth. The New Testament praises churches for proclaiming the truth, "for from you the word of the Lord has been spread abroad" (1 Thessalonians 1:8). The New Testament commends early Christians for defending the truth, "partakers with me...in the defense and confirmation of the gospel" (Philippians 1:7). There is not a single verse in all of Scriptures which indicates that the church has the authority to develop new truth, or to decree new truth as being from the mouth of God.

"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:26). This was a promise given to the apostles alone. The Holy Spirit would help the apostles to remember everything that Jesus had said to them. Nowhere does this Scripture state that there would be an apostolic line of successors, and that the promise would also be for them.

"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:18-19). These verses are used by the Roman Catholic Church to support their teaching that Peter was the first pope, and that the church was built upon him. But when taken in context with what takes place in the Book of Acts, you find that Peter was the one who opened up the gospel to the world in the sense that it was he who first preached the gospel of Christ on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). It was he who first preached the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10). So, the binding and loosing was done through the preaching of the gospel, not through any Roman Catholic tradition.

While it is clearly evident that Scripture argues for its own authority, Scripture nowhere argues for "authoritative tradition equal with Scripture." In fact, the New Testament has more to say against traditions than it does in favor of tradition.

The Roman Catholic Church argues that Scripture was given to men by the Church and therefore the Church has equal or greater authority to it. However, even among the Roman Catholic Church's writings (from the First Vatican Council), you will find the acknowledgment that the Church councils that determined which books were to be considered the Word of God did nothing but recognize what the Holy Spirit had already made evident. That is, the Church did not "give" Scriptures to men, but simply "recognized" what God, through the Holy Spirit, had already given. As A. A. Hodge states, when a peasant recognizes a prince and is able to call him by name, it does not give him the

right to rule over the kingdom. In like fashion, a church council recognizing which books were God-breathed and possessed the traits of a God-inspired book, does not give the church council equal authority with those books.

In summary, even though the Bible does not contain the exact words “the written Word stands alone, apart from tradition, as our sole authority for faith and practice,” that principle is found throughout. The Old Testament writers, Jesus, and the apostles consistently turn to the Scriptures as their measuring stick and commend the same standard to all.

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Question: "Are Catholic beliefs and practices biblical?"

Answer: The issue concerning any church and its practices should be "Is this biblical?" If a teaching is Biblical (taken in context), it should be embraced. If it is not, it should be rejected. God is more interested in whether a church is doing His will and obeying His Word than whether it can trace a line of succession back to Jesus' apostles. Jesus was very concerned about abandoning the Word of God to follow the traditions of men (Mark 7:7). Traditions are not inherently invalid...there are some good and valuable traditions. Again, the issue must be whether a doctrine, practice, or tradition is Biblical. How then does the Roman Catholic Church compare with the teachings of the Word of God?

Salvation: The Roman Catholic Church teaches that salvation is by baptismal regeneration and is maintained through the Catholic sacraments unless a willful act of sin is committed that breaks the state of sanctifying grace. The Bible teaches that we are saved by grace which is received through simple faith (Ephesians 2:8-9), and that good works are the result of a change of the heart wrought in salvation (Ephesians 2:10; 2 Corinthians 5:17) and the fruit of that new life in Christ (John 15).

Assurance of salvation: The Roman Catholic Church teaches that salvation cannot be guaranteed or assured. 1 John 5:13 states that the letter of 1 John was written for the purpose of assuring believers of the CERTAINTY of their salvation.

Good Works: The Roman Catholic Church states that Christians are saved by meritorious works (beginning with baptism) and that salvation is maintained by good works (receiving the sacraments, confession of sin to a priest, etc.) The Bible states that Christians are saved by grace through faith, totally apart from works (Titus 3:5; Ephesians 2:8-9; Galatians 3:10-11; Romans 3:19-24).

Baptism: In the New Testament baptism is ALWAYS practiced AFTER saving faith in Christ. Baptism is not the means of salvation; it is faith in the Gospel that saves (1 Corinthians 1:14-18; Romans 10:13-17). The Roman Catholic Church teaches baptismal regeneration of infants, a practice never found in Scripture. The only possible hint of infant baptism in the Bible that the Roman Catholic Church can point to is that the whole household of the Philippian jailer was baptized in Acts 16:33. However, the context nowhere mentions infants. Acts 16:31 declares that salvation is by faith. Paul spoke to all of the household in verse 32, and the whole household believed (verse 34). This passage only supports the baptism of those who have already believed, not of infants.

Prayer: The Roman Catholic Church teaches Catholics to not only pray to God, but also to petition Mary and the saints for their prayers. Contrary to this, we are taught in Scripture to only pray to God (Matthew 6:9; Luke 18:1-7).

Priesthood: The Roman Catholic Church teaches that there is a distinction between the clergy and the "lay people," whereas the New Testament teaches the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:9).

Sacraments: The Roman Catholic Church teaches that a believer is infused with grace upon reception of the sacraments. Such teaching is nowhere found in Scripture.

Confession: The Roman Catholic Church teaches that unless a believer is hindered, the only way to receive the forgiveness of sins is by confessing them to a priest. Contrary to this, Scripture teaches that confession of sins is to be made to God (1 John 1:9).

Mary: The Roman Catholic Church teaches, among other things, that Mary is the Queen of Heaven, a perpetual virgin, and the co-redemptress who ascended into heaven. In Scripture, she is portrayed as an obedient, believing servant of God, who became the mother of Jesus. None of the other attributes mentioned by the Roman Catholic Church have any basis in the Bible. The idea of Mary being the co-redemptress and another mediator between God and man is not only extra-biblical (found only outside of Scripture), but is also unbiblical (contrary to Scripture). Acts 4:12 declares that Jesus is the only redeemer. 1 Timothy 2:5 proclaims that Jesus is the only mediator between God and men.

Many other examples could be given. These issues alone clearly identify the Catholic Church as being unbiblical. Every Christian denomination has traditions and practices that are not explicitly based on Scripture. That is why Scripture must be the standard of Christian faith and practice. The Word of God is always true and reliable. The same cannot be said of church tradition. Our guideline is to be: "What does Scripture say?" (Romans 4:3; Galatians 4:30; Acts 17:11). 2 Timothy 3:16-17 declares, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Recommended Resource: Reasoning from the Scriptures with Catholics by Ron Rhodes