

## Big T and small “t” Tradition

By Erik Wait

In my last lesson on the Bible we discussed the attributes of Scripture which are summarized in the acronym N.A.P.S. which stands for:

N = \_\_\_\_\_

A = \_\_\_\_\_

P = \_\_\_\_\_

S = \_\_\_\_\_

During the era of the Reformation, the issue underlying the controversy was the issue of the Scriptures as the sole inerrant and infallible authority of for faith (doctrine) and practice (Morals) verses the Roman Catholic Church’s contention that the Scriptures, Tradition, and the Magisterium which is the Pope (in conjunction with the cardinals) when speaking authoritatively from the “Chair of Peter” (*ex cathedra*) on any issue relating to faith and morals.

In this lesson we will look at the Bible teaching on Tradition in both a positive and negative fashion and develop a definition of Tradition from Scripture. Then we will briefly look at the different and conflicting definitions of the Roman Catholic doctrine of Tradition.

### Negative and Positive Traditions

Negative:

“‘Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.’ And He (Jesus) answered and said to them, ‘Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?’ For God said, ‘HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER,’ and, ‘HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER IS TO BE PUT TO

DEATH.' But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, 'Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God,' he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition (Greek: *paradosin*).” (Matthew 15:2-6)

“See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition (Greek: *paradosin*) of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.” (Colossians 2:8)

Positive:

“Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition (Greek: *paradosin*) which you received from us.” (2 Thessalonians 3:6)

### **The Roman Catholic Church’s Definition(s) of Tradition**

The Roman Catholic contention is that there are traditions of men that are forbidden and then there is a Tradition that is handed down from Jesus and the apostles apart from Scripture. However, depending on who you ask, Rome is not in complete agreement with itself on the definition of this second form of tradition Some will assert that Tradition is a *verbal* non-written form of the Word of God:

“Tradition is the non-written Word of God, which has been transmitted by word of mouth by Jesus Christ and by the Apostles, and which has come down to us through the centuries by the means of the Church, without being altered.” [1]

Others assert that Tradition is the authoritative *interpretation* of Scripture:

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<sup>1</sup> Q&A 61, “The Catechism of Pope Pius X”, Instauratio Press.

“The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ...” [2]

### **Scripture’s Definition of Tradition**

What is *paradosin*? The NIV’s translation of 2 Thessalonians 3:6 is helpful in that interprets it as follows:

“In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.”

In short, the word *paradosin* (tradition) simply means “teaching.” However, the problem is what the bible presents as God ways of teaching, Jesus’ ways of teaching in His earthly ministry and the apostle’s means of teaching in their epistles and earthly ministry is radically different form the ways in which we think of it as we are taught in our schools, colleges and in seminaries.

### **Tradition/Teaching by Word and Action**

Time does not permit us to look at and consider all of the examples of the how tradition (teaching) is conveyed throughout redemptive history. But, throughout most of history believers did not have a copy of the Bible for themselves. The Word of God was conveyed in oral teaching (particularly the Levites who had a copy in the synagogue) and the people of God knew the Word because they memorized it, sang/chanted it in a rhythmic fashion and the teaching was lived out through various actions such as signs/symbols (sacraments), holy days with feast and festivals and the drama of the sacrificial system with the prescribed liturgical calendar.

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<sup>2</sup> “Vatican II: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” n. 10.

## God's Teaching By Word and Action

We see then that God taught and commanded by word and action such that if the covenant child asked, the parent “Why do we keep the Sabbath?” the answer would not be simply, “Because God said so” but rather because “God commanded us to for He too worked six days and then rested.” (Exodus 20:8-11) Teaching/tradition then is always by *word* and *example*, such that the action reinforces what is being taught or commanded. The people of God were to keep the commandments and be kind towards sojourners because God said so and they were once slaves and sojourners and God delivered them from bondage and was hospitable towards them. This was how the fathers were to teach their children so that when they asked, “What does the word of God mean to you?” they would respond by recounting the saving actions of God:

“When your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What do the testimonies and the statutes and the judgments mean which the LORD our God commanded you?’ Then you shall say to your son, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the LORD brought us from Egypt with a mighty hand. ‘Moreover, the LORD showed great and distressing signs and wonders before our eyes against Egypt, Pharaoh and all his household; He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land which He had sworn to our fathers.’ So the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God for our good always and for our survival, as it is today. It will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all this commandment before the LORD our God, just as He commanded us.” (Leviticus 6:20-25)

They were to be patient (longsuffering) because God said so and because God was patient towards them. They were to be forgiving of each because God said so and because God forgave them of their sins. God does not merely say to us, “do such and such” He provides for us an example by demonstrating those communicable attributes in His own actions.

This teaching by word and action can be seen in that the cleansing rite of circumcision/baptism teaches us something about God's salvation cleansing us from sin, the feast days (Passover/Lord's Supper) reinforce the verbal proclamation of the Gospel as we read, "I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." (Exodus 20:2) The repeated memorial feast days are then a historical reenactment of the redemptive word of God so that when we observe the Lord's Supper we are in a sense reliving the original historical event, "And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me." (Luke 22: 19) The tradition/teaching of remembering Christ is not a mere mentally cognitive process, but a historical reenactment in which the Gospel (the good news of the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ) is lived out in an action. This is why Peter is confronted by Paul when his actions of siding with the Pharisees contradicted the gospel that unites Jew and Gentile in Christ at the table without circumcision (Galatians 2:11-14) and the Corinthians were being judged because their actions towards one another in the church contradicted the teaching of the Gospel in the Lord's Supper, for in it, Paul says, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." (1 Corinthians 11:26) The good news is supposed to be proclaimed in verbal proclamation (word) and action (eating and drinking).

### **The Apostle Paul's Teaching by Word and Action**

"But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the

truth. 8. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men of depraved mind, rejected in regard to the faith. 9. But they will not make further progress; for their folly will be obvious to all, just as Jannes' and Jambres' folly was also. Now you followed my teaching (Greek: *didaskalia*), conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, 11. persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord rescued me! Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:1-17)

We see in this text that “teaching” was not merely something to be heard in a lecture and then regurgitated verbally but it was to be learned and followed by following the teacher’s example. YHWH in the Old testament, Jesus in the Gospels and the Paul in his teaching (*didaskalia*) Timothy and Titus (his “sons”) was by word and example. This is the Tradition (*paradosin*) that was to be handed down.

### **Commanded Tradition**

In short, the Tradition (Big “T”) that is required are those teachings and actions that are commanded by God, exemplified by Jesus and the apostles which are recorded in Scripture. These include loving one’s neighbor as Jesus did, baptizing and observing the Lord’s Supper as the apostles taught and practiced and so forth.

### **Permitted But Not Commanded tradition**

The tradition (small “t”) that is permitted are those teachings and actions that are allowed by God, exemplified by the saints of the Old Testament, Jesus and the apostles as exemplified in Scripture. This would include such things as celebrating the redemptive work of God in the festival of Purim in which God providentially saved His people through the faithful actions of Esther:

“But the Jews who were in Susa assembled on the thirteenth and the fourteenth of the same month, and they rested on the fifteenth day and made it a day of feasting and rejoicing. Therefore the Jews of the rural areas, who live in the rural towns, make the fourteenth day of the month Adar a holiday for rejoicing and feasting and sending portions of food to one another.” (Esther 9:18-19)

The people added a holiday to the calendar to celebrate the redemptive acts of God in order to remember the event and teach it to their children. The tradition of Purim was not commanded by God but since it did not incorporate pagan practices of contradict what was already commanded it did not violate what we refer to today as the “regulative principle of worship.”

Likewise the addition to the celebration of Passover with wine was not commanded in the institution of the Passover and yet was observed by Jesus and incorporated into the Lord’s Supper by Jesus Himself. Of course, now that Jesus has incorporated wine into the sacrament is not merely permitted, but commanded. But the fact that Jesus did not oppose this non-commanded practice demonstrates that celebrating the salvation of God can include more than (though into less than) what God requires so long as it does not incorporate pagan practices or contradict the clear teaching of God’s Word.

## Forbidden Tradition

In short, forbidden tradition (small “t” and any claim to Big “T”) that is forbidden are those teachings and actions that contradict the teaching of God such as when we read in Matthew 5 in which Jesus repeatedly says, “You have heard it said...” and then He quotes a tradition of the Pharisees and then he provides a correct teaching and practice and says, “but I say to you...” Forbidden tradition is also the incorporation pagan practices and doctrines such as when the Israelites incorporated the worship of the Egyptian god Hapis (the golden calf) and referred to it as YHWH (Exodus 32:4ff.) or when they imitated the cultic practices of the people in the land contrary to the Law of God:

“When the LORD your God cuts off before you the nations which you are going in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, beware that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How do these nations serve their gods, that I also may do likewise?' You shall not behave thus toward the LORD your God, for every abominable act which the LORD hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it.”  
(Deuteronomy 12:29-32)

The “not adding to” specifically refers to adding pagan practices to the Worship of YHWH, not merely celebrating the redemptive acts of God in a non prescribed way such as adding Purim to the holiday calendar or adding wine to the Passover which are not tied to any form of paganism.

While we do not have time to go into details in this brief lesson, much of what is taught and practiced in the Roman Catholic Church comes not from Scripture but from neo-platonic philosophy that seeped into the early church and the incorporation of the metaphysics of Aristotle from the middle ages.

## **Jesus' Teaching by Word and Action**

“Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.” (1 Timothy 1:16)

Given the above examples of how teaching and Tradition entails word and action, search through the Gospels and provide three passages in the Gospels in which Jesus taught by Word and Action:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## **Big “T” Tradition vs. small “t” tradition**

Both Protestants and Roman Catholics recognize that we both have traditions (small “t”) that we do not consider to be infallible, inerrant, and unchangeable. There are cultural traditions (customs) such as having a birthday cake to celebrate someone’s birth or exchanging rings to signify one’s wedding vows. There are also ecclesiastical traditions (customs) such as pastors not being allowed to be married after their ordination in Roman Catholicism and teachings that are amendable (called “disciplines”) such as the prohibition of eating meat on Fridays which was changed at Vatican 2. Likewise, there is the Westminster Tradition of Presbyterianism which has been changed such as the assertion that the Pope is the antichrist.

There are also things which Roman Catholicism asserts as Tradition (Big “T”) in doctrine and practice which Historical Protestantism views as contracting Scripture and are the result of incorporating extra-biblical documents (the apocrypha) which results in their doctrine of purgatory and Greek philosophy into the church which results in their doctrine and practice of the Transubstantiation of the body and blood of Jesus into the Eucharist (the bread) in the Lord’s Supper.

## Teaching the Gospel Through “t” Tradition

What traditions (small “t”) do we have that not required by God, but are permissible because they do not contradict the teaching and practice of Scripture AND they do not incorporate pagan doctrines and practices:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_