

# A Light in the Darkness

THE DOCTRINE OF THE WORD OF GOD

# “Traditions” in Scripture

- 2 Thess. 2:15 | “So then, brothers, stand firm and *hold to the traditions* that you were taught by us, either *by our spoken word* or by our letter.”
- 2 Thess. 3:6 | “Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and *not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.*”
- 2 Tim. 2:2 | “And what you have *heard from me* in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.”
- 1 Cor. 11:2 | “Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and *maintain the traditions* even as I delivered them to you.”

Discuss...

How are we think about exhortations to obey traditions that may not have been written down?

# Response

## – Tradition is a good thing

- Despite the Evangelical allergy to tradition, tradition itself is a rich aspect of Christian history to be embraced. We would do well to remember what faithful brothers and sister have taught and believed before us as we stand on their shoulders in the tasks of theology and practice in the Christian life.

## – Jesus and the authors and Scripture undoubtedly taught more than they wrote

- Jesus said so much that all the books in the world would not be enough to contain his teachings, much less the Bible itself! (Jn. 20:30)
- Paul stayed in Ephesus, for example, for multiple years, teaching day in and day out. (Acts 19:8-10)
- We do not have the written record of Paul's late-night teaching at Troas. (Acts. 20:7)
- Peter was an elder himself (1 Pet. 5:1), presumably teaching and instructing regularly, even when mistaken! (Gal 2:11-14)

# Response

- What was the content of the “traditions?”
  - Prior to an established written testimony, oral communication of the Christian truths was the primary vehicle for communication of the Gospel and theology.
    - Nothing about the presence of authoritative oral teaching in Christian history threatens formal sufficiency/*sola Scriptura*, however.
    - It is irrelevant that the apostles did not practice *sola Scriptura*. *Sola Scriptura* is not the claim that there has never been authoritative oral teaching—there obviously was, as the truth of the Gospel was known and proclaimed before it was written down! Rather, it is a claim about the contents of Scripture itself.

# Response

- In order to threaten *sola Scriptura*/formal sufficiency, the oral teaching would need to be:
  - not found anywhere in Scripture
  - applicable to all Christians in all eras
  - information or commands necessary for living rightly before God
- The burden of proof is on those who claim that such oral teaching was given.

# Traditions in Church History

- For the first three centuries of the church, the only sense in which “tradition” was considered universally authoritative was insofar as it articulated the *regula fidei* (rule of faith), a summary of the core of the Gospel and the Christian faith, expressed in the places like the Apostle’s Creed and employed by the Church Fathers to combat heresy and engage in evangelism.

# Traditions in Church History

- “Suppose there arises a dispute relative to some important question among us, should we not have recourse to the most ancient Churches with which the apostles held constant intercourse, and learn from them what is certain and clear in regard to the present question? For how should it be if the apostles themselves had not left us writings? **Would it not be necessary, [in that case,] to follow the course of the tradition which they handed down to those to whom they did commit the Churches?** To which course many nations of those barbarians who believe in Christ do assent, having salvation written in their hearts by the Spirit, without paper or ink, and, **carefully preserving the ancient tradition, believing in one God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and all things therein, by means of Christ Jesus, the Son of God; who, because of His surpassing love towards His creation, condescended to be born of the virgin, He Himself uniting man through Himself to God, and having suffered under Pontius Pilate, and rising again, and having been received up in splendor, shall come in glory, the Savior of those who are saved, and the Judge of those who are judged, and sending into eternal fire those who transform the truth, and despise His Father and His advent.**” - Irenaeus (ca. 180)



# Traditions in Church History

- Tradition II

- In the fourth century, we begin to find hints, but not clear endorsements, of a dual-source concept of Tradition. This is in part because “Tradition” was used to describe more than just “authoritative teaching” and was extended to include various church practices (e.g., Tertullian’s “triple immersion” at baptism).

- **Clear endorsements** of Tradition *as extra-biblical, authoritative teaching preserved by the Church as a parallel to Scripture* did not emerge until late in the Middle Ages (likely around the twelfth century). The dual-source concept of Tradition was made official Roman Catholic dogma at the Council of Trent in the fifteenth century.

- Tradition III

- Material Sufficiency

- Seems to stem largely from First Vatican Council’s pronouncement of papal infallibility.
  - Material sufficiency and the suggestion that it is taught in and/or even compatible with official Catholic dogma has been criticized by respectable Catholics

# A Word of Practical Counsel

- Do not get into a Church Father quoting contest with a Catholic—it will (often) be a fruitless back and forth where both parties accuse the other of taking things out of context and misunderstanding what the ECF's meant.
  - Catholics who *start* with the Bible for their doctrine are on losing ground; Protestants who *start* with accepting the supreme authority of the church are on losing ground.

# The Argument from Disagreement

- A Two-Fold Task
  - Does disagreement demonstrate that Scripture isn't clear in the way formal sufficiency claims?
  - *If it makes sense to talk about Scripture being clear in light of so much disagreement, should the fact that so many smart, godly people disagree about much of Scripture cause us believe we can't really know what it means, even if it's "clear" somehow?*
- Clarifying Clarity
  - What, exactly, are we saying is "clear?"
    - "The whole counsel of God *concerning all things necessary for his glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture*: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men."  
WCF I.VI (1646)
    - This is compatible with many parts of Scripture being much less clear than others, despite being *ultimately understandable*. An incredible

# The Argument from Disagreement

- amount of the disagreement surrounding what the Bible teaches occurs in these areas.
  - Nevertheless, there is still disagreement (though, much, much less) in these “necessary” areas, so the objection cannot be dodged simply by clarifying (e.g., narrowing), the definition.
- Sin
  - If sin distorts our perception and thinking regarding spiritually minded things, is it reasonable to *expect* agreement on the interpretation of any message, no matter how clear?
    - Objective vs. Subjective Clarity—the clearest approach?
      - What is *objective* clarity/understandability?
        - Suggestion: communicative *excellence*, anyone who understands the language and context *should* understand the meaning—any shortcoming in proper understanding lies with the interpreter
    - So, sin provides a strong explanation for why there is so much disagreement over a message communicated so perfectly.

# The Argument from Disagreement

- Developing understandings of Scripture as a whole (some people are just further down the “hermeneutical spiral”)
  - Is disagreement over specific passages among those who are at different places in their understanding of the *whole* Story “troublesome?”
- Differing levels of historical and grammatical/lexical knowledge in interpretation
  - Is disagreement with people who interpret the Bible with little recourse to historical context or facility in original languages or hermeneutics “troublesome?”
- Philosophical presuppositions
  - Is disagreement with those who have different *functional* authorities for Christian faith and practice “troublesome” for the clarity of Scripture?

# But What About the Disagreement of “Shared-Value” Experts?

- The Epistemology of Disagreement
  - Are our Catholic friends consistent here?
    - Fallibilism | Certainty not required for knowledge
  - What about disagreement surrounding who *is* the true church or infallible interpreter?
    - Self-authentication, redux
  - What about disagreements within Catholic theology and practice?
  - Disagreement about disagreement—an awkward end

# Summary

- No one can understand Scripture 1) exhaustively 2) with equal clarity in all places or 3) all at once. These realities, combined with sin and a host of other factors that affect Christians as interpreters, make disagreement over the proper interpretation of the Scriptures *likely*, not unlikely. Nevertheless, those things “necessary for [God’s] glory, man’s salvation, faith and life” are communicated so excellently that when the church *community* listens carefully to Scripture *as supreme*, there is widespread *agreement* about the *core message and imperatives* of Scripture, with outstanding disagreement not threatening knowledge claims any more than any other area of life.