

KEEP WHAT TRADITIONS?

¹³But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, ¹⁴to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.

¹⁶Now 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, ¹⁷comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work.

Well, we begin a mini-series today where we discuss the role of tradition and of Scripture in the life of the Church and the life of the Christian. As we briefly talked about last week, The Word of God is declared as faithful and true. When we read the Scripture we can rely on it. But what do we do when we come across passages that are vague or unclear. I cannot tell you how many times I have been involved in discussions with Christians where I hear Christian A quote such and such Chapter and verse and declare the issue is solved, and then Christian B comes back and quotes such and other chapter and verse and declare that they have also solved the issue. The problem is that they are both saying completely different things, and one thing I know about this is they both cannot be right. It is possible they could both be wrong, but if I say, for example God created the world in one week, and someone else says to me, “no, God used the evolutionary process to bring about creation over a period of millions or billions of years.” There is no true middle ground in that discussion. Either one is right and the other is wrong, or they are both wrong. They cannot both be correct.

I use that example not to try and draw unnecessary division, but because that issue has tended to be one that Christians have argued about for at least a little while. There are countless other issues that I could bring up, and I may as we go on but what I want us to understand is that there are often issues where Christians are divided. There are 33,000 plus denominations in the United States alone, and as we discussed earlier, just because someone is in the same denomination does not mean that they necessarily agree on everything.

It would be a little simplistic to say the reason that everyone disagrees with you is because they have not studied quite the way you have. They have allowed tradition to get in their way, they don't have as much knowledge as you have in the original languages and what not. There are obvious issues that cause differences of opinion amongst Christians. And this is really not a new thing. Christians have disagreed since the very first century. Paul and Peter had disagreements that are discussed within the pages of Scripture.

Well, it is to be expected that we will have disagreements, but ultimately our disagreements should not cause us to be divided. Sadly this has not often been the case. Disagreements according to the Scripture must happen. But they have a purpose. First Corinthians 11:18-19 speaks to us about not only the fact that there are divisions, but also the purpose behind them.

¹⁸For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. ¹⁹For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you.

Hear this word, Paul tells us that divisions must happen. But Paul is not disturbed by this because the divisions have a purpose and that is allowing the church to recognize who has been approved. But this brings up another question: How is the church to recognize what is correct and what is wrong?

One thing I am very aware of is that there tends to be in human nature a cult of personality. If you have two differing opinions being argued and one of those opinions is argued by someone who is very personable and likable his or her personality will often be able to sway people to his or her side. There is also the fact that some people are just more persuasive than others. Some of you know exactly what I am talking about. There are people with an incredibly strong personality, who are able to over talk you, shut you down, and before you know it they will even have you convinced you agree with them, all the while, you have just been stealthily manipulated. Again these examples are just examples of how conflict is often dealt with. But the Bible gives us an example of how we should deal with disagreements and it is quite easy, but it requires a little bit of diligence and a little bit of effort. It also requires an attitude that is not easily offended.

Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.

Quite often we overlook the meaning of simple words in life in general. When we do this in regard to the Bible, we find our selves missing out on the very words of life. The first thing I want us to notice in this verse is the word “therefore.” Obviously, I have talked about the word therefore several times. Who can tell me what the word “therefore” should make us want to do? Whenever we see the word therefore, we must ask ourselves, “What is it therefore?”

Well the immediate context of these words is the apostle giving thanks and I quote “*because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, ¹⁴ to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

So because they have been chose from the beginning they are then given a responsibility. They are given a task. Their task is to stand fast, which means to hold on to tenaciously like a dog with a bone to what had been taught to them. But the question comes in how do we know what to keep a hold on, and what to let go?

The Words from Paul in this text are that we hold fast to the traditions which they were taught, whether they were taught by word or epistle. So Paul puts emphasis in this text on both the apostolic verbal teaching and the written Scripture. However the emphasis on this teaching is also focused on the sovereignty of God and the purposes He has called us to, which is obtaining Glory for the Lord Jesus Christ.

One thing we learn from a study of Church History is that Church History is full of many strange and bizarre teachings that cause men to glory not in Christ, but to many other things. I can give a few examples. Men have

gloried in buildings, they have gloried in statues, they have gloried in men, often in the name of religion. And I have watched people quote this passage to try and tell me that we need to place proper reverence to traditions. However the traditions that we are told to honor in this passage are traditions that were taught by apostles. Tradition for the sake of tradition is not where our focus needs to be.

Remember it was John Calvin who said of the Human Heart, that it was an idol factory. Our heart tends to make idols of everything. There are many things that are what we would call good things, but because of an improperly placed focus or emphasis, those good things, become or have become idolatrous. Let me give you an example of this from the Bible. In Numbers 21 beginning in the 4th verse we see the Children of Israel while they are wandering in the wilderness:

⁴ Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. ⁵ And the people spoke against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread." ⁶ So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.

⁷ Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

So here we have the children of Israel in their normal state. They are out in the middle of the wilderness, they have been delivered from their enemies, and yet they find themselves grumbling and complaining against God. And so God raises up an enemy against them. The enemy He raises up in this place was in the form of a fiery serpent. We are told the serpent bit many of them and they were dying. The people, and this is a very familiar pattern then went to Moses, and confessed that they had sinned and they repented of their continuous murmuring and complaining against the Lord, and God gave Moses a solution.

Moses crafted a bronze fiery serpent of his own at the command of the Word of the Lord and placed it on a pole. Whoever would look to this serpent, once they were bitten, would not die, but they would live.

God had sent deliverance from this horrible plague. Now...this whole episode was only 5 verses long in the Book of Numbers. We see Israel, immediately before this, victorious, they then become complacent in their victory, and begin to murmur and complain, After this God sends judgment, and Israel is moved to repent, and God sends an answer, this time in the form of this Bronze serpent crafted by Moses.

Now let us move forward in time nearly a thousand years to the account of Hezekiah.

2 Kings 18: 1-4

18 Now it came to pass in the third year of Hoshea the son of Elah, king of Israel, that Hezekiah the son of Ahaz, king of Judah, began to reign.² He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah.³ And he did what was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done.

⁴ He removed the high places and broke the sacred pillars, cut down the wooden image and broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan.

Here we see good King Hezekiah recognizing an issue with the children of Israel. This bronze serpent which had been used by God, to point to Christ some 1,000 years earlier now became not a pointer to Christ as was intended, but had become an idol. The children of Israel had set this up, along side of sacred pillars, and wooden images, and had begin to burn incense to this "NEHUSHTAN." The Hebrew text here is rather interesting. The way it reads in the English might cause us to miss the meaning of the text. The children of Israel had begun burning incense to this image, but it was Hezekiah, who called it NEHUSHTAN, which means "A piece of brass/"

How often have we allowed traditions and things which started out good or fine to actually obscure the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ? We are a superstitious people. We sometimes place scorn on certain Christians for their idolizing of saints, and their worship of icons, which I will admit are idolatrous, and yet we turn a blind eye to our own "Hero Worship." We can learn from many of the earlier Christians, but we have to remember that even good men, can often point us in the wrong direction. How do we guard ourselves against this tyranny of idolatry?

Well in Acts 17 we read about Paul and Silas preaching to the believers in Berea:

¹⁰ Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.¹¹ 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.

Paul and Silas are preaching to these men in the synagogue of the Jews and these men are singled out in difference to the ones in Thessalonica. They received God's Words, but they were not done at that point. Where the New King James uses the word fair-minded, the King James says of the Bereans at this point that they were more noble than the Thessalonians. Why was this, because though they received the Word eagerness, they then searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether what was being said to them was true.

I believe one of the things that we should do, of we would be fair minded, is we need to be like these men of Berea. When your pastor proclaims God's Word to you it is great to receive it with eagerness. You should be eager receivers, but and I do not believe John or Steve would disagree with me at this point at all, once you have received the Word, it is now time to begin the investigation of the text. Paul was an apostle, and yet these Bereans checked Him out. Is what He is saying true?

There is so much nonsense that goes on in Christian circles today in large part because certain men have been elevated to positions where it is deemed inappropriate to question them. Well remember we are commanded to search the Scriptures to find out whether what is being preached is true. I know for a fact that Pastor Stoos does not freak out when you ask him a question about something he has preached.

We are commanded to hold fast to the traditions, but whose tradition are we holding on to. Are they traditions of human making or are the traditions from the Word of God? This is something we must be ever vigilant in our pursuit of?