

## HOW HOLY IS TRADITION?

**D**uring the past 20 years the Bible has been exerting its authority in a new and exciting way in the lives of many Christians. Countless individuals have discovered the beauty and power of the Word of God. People are trying to do what is right, to live “by the Bible”. More and more people are asking “What does the Bible say about...?” Sometimes people have been led to question the need for anything but the Bible in Christian life. In this article we hope to treat a number of questions often posed concerning Tradition. We will use the Bible itself to find some of the answers.

## IS THE BIBLE FUNDAMENTAL TO CHRISTIANITY?

**Y**es, through the Holy Scriptures “... *you can learn the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and can profitably be used for teaching, for refuting error, for guiding people's lives, and teaching them to be holy. This is how the man who is dedicated to God becomes fully equipped and ready for any good work*” (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

## THEN ALL I NEED TO DO IS FOLLOW THE BIBLE?

**N**ot exactly. The Bible itself tells us “*Stand firm, then, brothers, and keep the traditions that we taught you, whether by word of mouth or by letter*” (2 Thessalonians 2:15, emphasis added). The apostles did not write down everything the Holy Spirit inspired them to do or teach,

but they expected them to be followed nonetheless.

Well, isn't everything necessary for salvation written in the Bible?

Yes, but not everything *helpful* for salvation is written in the Bible. John said he could have written a lot more about Jesus (cf. John 21:25). Surely other accounts about Jesus and His teachings would be helpful and life-giving, but the fullness of His teachings was never written down. We know of one of them that was never recorded in the Gospels (cf. Acts 20:35) and it was surely not the only one.

In the same way, the apostles did not write down everything they did or taught. Paul notes, “*Do all the things that you learned from me and have been taught by me and have heard or seen that I do*” (Philippians 4:9). Their Church practiced these things, not merely because they were written, but because they were done. Thus, for example, the disciples of the apostles fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays and observed daily hours of prayer (cf. *The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*, c 120 AD). Besides the written Word of God, then, Tradition helps us to be *fully equipped* to be mature servants of the Lord.

## BUT DIDN'T JESUS CONDEMN TRADITION?

**J**esus condemned Jewish tradition only when it rendered God's Word void. Jesus said, “*The scribes and the Pharisees occupy the chair of Moses. You must therefore do what they tell you and listen to what they say; but do not be guided by what they do, since they do not practice what they preach*” (Matthew 23:2-3, emphasis added). He thereby affirmed Tradition. But Jesus rebuked the Pharisees when

they neglected God's Word. “*You pay your tithe of mint and dill and cummin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law – justice, mercy, good faith! These you should have practiced without neglecting the others*” (Matthew 22:23, emphasis added). Notice that the other traditions and practices were not to be rejected, but kept in proper perspective.

Sometimes people attach greater value to familiar customs than to the Word of God. Or they cherish practices which are actually contrary to basic expressions of Holy Tradition. This kind of behavior is not of God and it contradicts authentic Tradition as well as the Bible.

## BUT HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT IS AUTHENTIC TRADITION?

**W**e believe by faith that the Church is the temple of God, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, who guides the Church to all truth (cf. John 16:12-13). Authentic Tradition reflects the guidance of the Holy Spirit by its coherence and continuity. It does not contradict Scripture and is consistent with what has been upheld by the Church from the beginning.

## CAN THERE BE NEW TEACHINGS?

**N**o, but teachings might *appear* new because they are stated more clearly or definitively in new or different circumstances. However to be authentic expressions of Holy Tradition they cannot be “new” in the sense that they are not in harmony with the Scripture or established teachings of the Tradition. Thus the term *Holy Trinity* is never found in Scripture; but it does speak with new clarity the truth of the Father,

Son and Holy Spirit which the Scripture does certainly teach.

## IS THIS TRADITION WRITTEN DOWN ANYWHERE?

**T**here are many outward forms or expressions of Tradition, such as the teachings of the Ecumenical Councils and the common teachings of the Church Fathers which are written. Other forms of Tradition may be thought of as more practiced than written. Thus the prayers and forms of the liturgy (e.g., the sign of the cross), the feasts and fasts of the Church year, and the “visible Tradition” of iconography, also reflect the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Likewise the effect of the Spirit's presence in the lives of the saints indicates that the Tradition of the Church is not simply a matter of books, but is lived out by the People of God.

## ISN'T THIS UNNECESSARILY COMPLICATED? AFTER ALL, ANYBODY CAN INTERPRET THE BIBLE.

**C**an they? – Not everyone possesses the same gift, or the same measure of a gift. *“Each one of us, however, has been given his own share of grace, given as Christ has allotted it”* (Ephesians 4:7) The Holy Spirit dwelling in the Church has given the gift of teaching to the community, but not to everyone in it. Writing about St Paul's epistles, St Peter says, *“There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures”* (2 Peter 3:16). Since it is the coherent and continuous expression of the Spirit's guidance in the Church, Holy Tradition is nec-

essary for understanding the Bible as it has been lived out among the people of God.

## HOW ARE WE TO VIEW THOSE WHO REJECT HOLY TRADITION?

**T**radition is the voice of the Spirit in the life of the Church. To reject Tradition is to reject a most vital work of the Spirit. And so we should be careful not to accept the biblical interpretations of those who cut themselves off from this life if they contradict Holy Tradition.

When possible we should lovingly and patiently explain that Scripture and the other forms of Holy Tradition are one. God continues to dwell in His people and shape them. He does not contradict Himself; but neither does He limit Himself as to the means by which He shapes us.

Adapted with permission from Br. Daniel F. Stramara, Jr.,  
*What the Bible Says About Tradition*  
(Pecos, NM, Dove Publications, 1984)

# HOW HOLY IS TRADITION?



OFFICE OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES  
MELKITE EPARCHY OF NEWTON  
<http://melkite.org/>

Photo credit St. George Melkite Church, Zababdeh