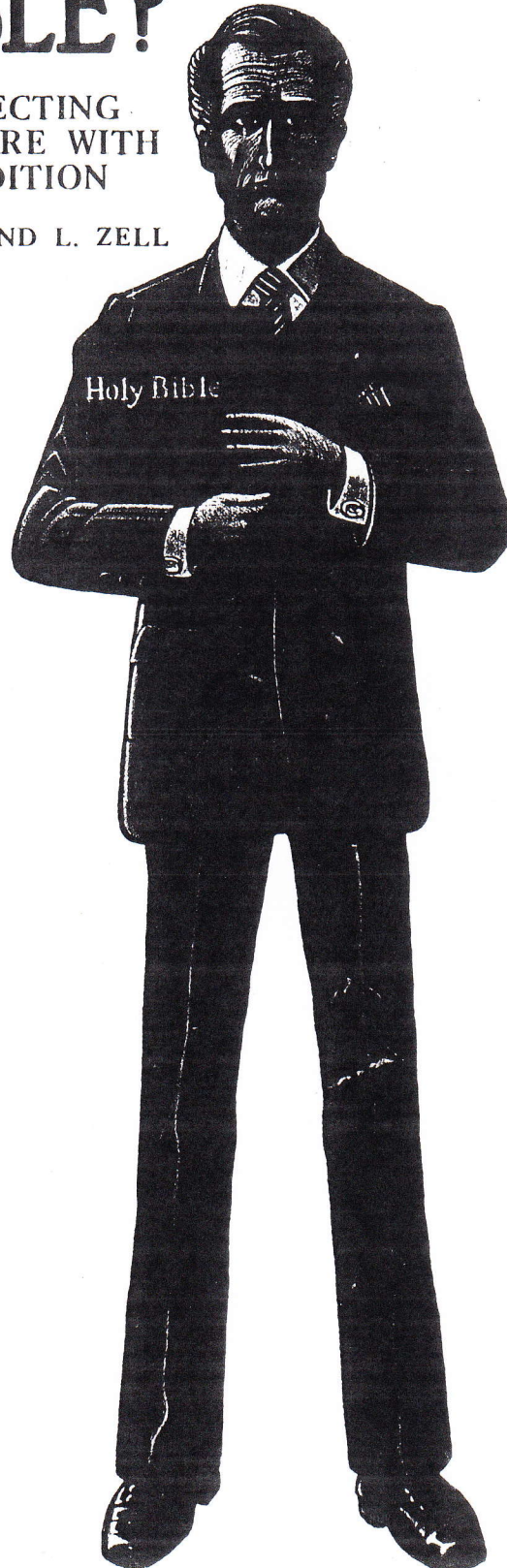


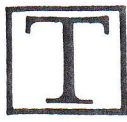
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WHO REALLY BELIEVES THE BIBLE?

PROTECTING
SCRIPTURE WITH
TRADITION

BY RAYMOND L. ZELL





here is a verse in Acts 17 which has probably collected as much "Bible Hi-liter" yellow in recent years as any other passage in Scripture. It reads, "These (the Bereans) 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 17:11).

To hear some modern preachers tell the story, you can almost visualize those first century Berean Jews frantically thumbing through their *Strong's Concordances* and "Interlinear Hebrew Torahs" to check out Paul's gospel.

If so, thank God for their example. After all, did not Christ tell the Jews in Jerusalem "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which bear witness of me?" (John 5:39). The Scriptures are "given by inspiration of God, and [are] profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (II Timothy 3:16) are they not? If someone is teaching doctrine that runs contrary to Scripture, why waste our time listening?

But wait a minute.

Let's not forget those Thessalonians also mentioned in Acts 17. Paul had visited them only a few days before going to Berea, and verse 2 tells us there were some genuine converts there. In fact, it is to these converts that the books of I and II Thessalonians were addressed.

Interestingly, when some doctrinal problems later came up in the Thessalonian Church, Paul did *not* instruct them to "search the Scriptures." Instead, he commanded them to "stand firm and hold the traditions" which they had been taught (II Thessalonians 2:15).

It seems that some phony

teachers had come into town to set up a "prophecy conference" for the eschatologically minded Thessalonians. And no doubt these teachers had plenty of Scripture verses lined up to support their views. Problem was, their interpretations and teachings ran counter to the inspired message of the apostles. These heretics were upsetting the Thessalonian believers and shaking their security in Christ.

Paul straightened things out by calling the Thessalonian believers to the "traditions" which had been delivered to them. What they needed that day was traditional apostolic doctrine—the very thing the false teachers had ignored. The word "tradition" means literally a "handing over," or that which is delivered or transmitted from one person to another.

Now, the word "tradition" sounds a little old-fashioned to us twentieth century Christians. I certainly never underlined II Thessalonians 2:15 in my Bible! But it was not foreign to the Christians there in Thessalonica. They knew exactly what traditions Saint Paul was speaking of.

And it would not have sounded foreign to Christians living in the second, third, or fourth centuries either. For hundreds of years to come, godly leaders looked to holy "Tradition" to make sure that what they were teaching squared with what godly men had taught before them. They didn't want to hold novel opinions about the faith like those deceivers in Thessalonica. It was only raving heretics who had the audacity to claim their interpretations of Scripture were solo performances.

THE MAKE-UP OF TRADITION

What did this tradition consist of? The most important aspect of Holy Tradition, the New Testament, was still in its developmental stage when Paul wrote to the Thessalonians. The Holy Scrip-

tures, God's infallible and unerring word delivered through the apostles, stand alone and without rival. Orthodox theologian Timothy Ware speaks for all Christendom when he says, "The Bible is the supreme expression of God's revelation to man."

People from my Evangelical background have bent over backwards to "hold fast" to this vital facet of Holy Tradition. A person could not consider himself to be Evangelical if he did not read the Scriptures regularly, attend a Bible believing Church where the Scriptures are both preached and practiced, and spend time meditating upon the message of Holy Writ.

And who among the early Fathers would disagree with that sentiment? Saint Jerome wrote that "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ." Saint Athanasius called those who neglect the Scriptures "worthy of utmost condemnation." And Saint Chrysostom said that not knowing the Scriptures is "the cause of all evils."

But tragically, somewhere in the white-heat intensity of the "Battle for the Bible," many Christians have entirely overlooked the rest of Holy Tradition. Indeed, to misquote a later verse in Acts, many Christians today would say in all honesty, "we have not even heard whether there is such a thing as Holy Tradition." What are some of the other elements of Tradition?

1) The on-site teaching of the Apostles:

For the early Church—and that includes the Church in Paul's day—Tradition did not stop with the written Scriptures. Remember, much of our New Testament had not even been written when Saint Paul wrote to the Thessalonians. And the New Testament was not formally canonized until the Council of Carthage in 397. But that doesn't mean that Christians

sat around idle for three centuries waiting for the Bible to be canonized—heavens no!

Believers during the first century may not have been able to pull a copy of the New Testament off their shelves, but they did have access to the direct teachings of the apostles—if not “face to face” (II John 12), at least by letter (Colossians 4:16). And if not by letter, at least by oral tradition (“whether *by word of mouth* or by letter from us.” II Thessalonians 2:15 NASB).

2) Instruction by those who knew the Twelve:

In addition to the direct teaching of the apostles, there was also the instruction and teaching of godly men established by the apostles to carry out their message. I don’t know about you, but if I heard that someone was coming to speak at Church who had spent time training under Saint Peter, I’d sure want to be seated—er standing—right up front.

3) The teaching of the Fathers:

That authoritative Tradition didn’t evaporate in the second century either. Even though the apostles were enrolled in heaven, the Church on earth was alive and well. And Christian leaders went right on teaching and leading their people in apostolic faith and practice. They still did not have the complete New Testament, but they did have apostolic Tradition and they “held fast” to it.

4) Rules of Faith:

Sometimes this Tradition took the form of the famous “rules of faith,” summaries of the core and substance of the Christian message written to refute the heretics. There were the early confessions, baptismal formulations, and catechetical lessons which had been passed on either orally or on parchment. And of course there was always a vibrant preaching and dynamic proclamation of God’s Word.

5) Creeds:

As the Church developed, Tradition also came to include decrees or creeds of the great ecumenical councils, the writings of the church Fathers, the decisions of later councils, the liturgical life and prayer of the Church, and, dare I say it, canon law. In fact, living Tradition has never really stopped, since by definition Tradition is “the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church” (Ware).

THE TRAUMA OF NON-TRADITION

Sadly, many Christians who *have* heard of Christian Tradition think only of allegedly dead, non-biblical pronouncements set down in isolation by medieval pontiffs. For that reason they see Scripture and Tradition to be in opposition, yea, poles apart. That would be true only with the “tradition of men” (Colossians 2:8). But there is a world of difference between tradition of men and Holy Tradition.

For the early Church, and for Orthodox Christians today, no such polarity exists between Scripture and Holy Tradition. They are two vital aspects of the same message. They represent God’s living and active Word to His people, neither frozen in time nor set against each other. Revelation and interpretation, source and substance, faith and practice, they have gone hand in hand throughout the ages as God’s living Tradition, sourced in the Holy Spirit whose task it is to lead the Church into all truth.

To illustrate, let’s take a look at a passage of Scripture that very practically points out how well Tradition guards our proper understanding of Scripture.

A TROUBLESOME VERSE

If ever there was a verse in the Bible that has fallen onto hard times, it has to be “baptism now saves you” (I Peter 3:21

NASB). Fortunately no one can deny that it is an authentic passage of Holy Scripture, written by one of Christ’s own disciples. But most of us who paid any attention at all to this verse did so only to explain what it didn’t mean.

But there it is, as plain as day. “For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is eight persons, were brought safely through the water. *And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him*” (I Peter 3:18-22, NASB, italics mine).

Is there a way to properly understand this verse without either ignoring it or falling into superstitious error? Certainly—through the clarifying lens of Holy Tradition. Does it teach that salvation is possible totally apart from faith—just by being baptized? Ridiculous!

To begin with, neither Saint Peter nor his intended audience had any misgivings about this terminology. It was common parlance in his day and age. He gives us no explanation, no long parenthetical clarification, and no apology. The issue in being saved was baptism.

And let’s remember, these words were not written at a time when Christians could afford hazy

teaching about salvation. Literally every verse of I Peter is illuminated by the very real presence of the torturer's flames. Roman executioners gave no second chance for Christians to rework their theology.

The violent flames of persecution spread over into the second and third centuries, and on into the fourth where they were finally quenched under Constantine. And throughout this terrible period (and way beyond it) men and women heard the Gospel message, renounced the world, and came to Christ. And *how* were they brought to Christ? Through the saving waters of baptism.

If space allowed, we could draw upon Holy Tradition to enlist a multitude of Christian leaders from that early period. They unanimously taught that the waters of baptism were the proper and natural means of bringing people to Christ. There were no altar calls, no appeals for mental "decisions" for Christ, and no "How to be Saved" booklets. Only a clear and methodical presentation of the Gospel (and by methodical, I mean weeks and often years of careful teaching and exposition) and a call for repentance and rebirth in Christ through the life-giving waters of baptism.

Had none of these people read Saint Paul's message of justification by faith? Were they teaching that we can come to Christ just by getting wet? Nonsense! One early bishop warned his catechumens ". . . if you persist in your wicked purpose you must not expect to receive any grace. The water may receive you, but the Spirit will not accept you." And later, "It is by believing and by accepting the forgiveness God offers you in baptism that your sins will be wiped away."

Holy Tradition does not allow us to ignore this verse. Neither

does it allow us to misinterpret it. In fact, Tradition does just the opposite. Through its penetrating eye we can properly understand the meaning of an otherwise troubling verse of Holy Scripture.

HANGING LOOSE OR HOLDING FAST

Recently I was encouraged to see *Moody Monthly*, a well known evangelical magazine, use a beautiful layout of the Nicene Creed for their front cover. However my joy turned to sorrow when a later issue of that same magazine came out. The editors had apparently received some flak from an element of their readership who disliked the Creed because of the line "I believe in baptism for the re-

THROUGH TRADITION'S PENETRATING EYE WE CAN PROPERLY UNDERSTAND THE MEANING OF AN OTHERWISE TROUBLESOME VERSE.

"But as for you, continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, 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."

—II Timothy 3:14-16

mission of sins." They feared that such a statement—a direct quote of Acts 2:38—denied the doctrine of justification by faith.

Horrified, I read on as the editor printed a formal apology for using the Nicene Creed and promised not to make such a mistake again. When I finished reading his retraction I was sick at heart.

Fellow Christian, I believe that we are coming to a crossroads in our commitment to Truth. It is the grace of God that has kept us, who in ignorance despised godly Tradition, in general proximity to the boundaries of true faith. But where is the dividing point between truth and error, between belief and heresy?

My plea is to those who, as I once did, say they love the Scriptures yet reject Holy Tradition. We are not being true to the Scriptures if we say we love the Bible apart from the historic Church. We are deceived if we profess to believe in the power of the Holy Spirit in inspiring the Scriptures, but deny His ongoing presence after the first century; we are making a mockery out of Christ who said He would lead the Church into all truth. And whether we recognize it or not, we are gradually slipping inch by inch away from the message of the Bible itself.

Godly Tradition protects and guards us against that error. Let us prove our love for the Word of God by holding fast to the clear message of the apostles as it has been handed down through the ages in the Church. May we stand fast in the Traditions which have been delivered to us.



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