

Hold the Traditions

Is "Sacred Tradition" biblical? Is the Word of God transmitted in its full purity from the apostles to our own time "from hand to hand" by tradition? Catholic authors frequently cite 2 Thessalonians 2:15 in support of this concept. For instance, a popular booklet states: "The Bible itself tells us to hold fast to Tradition, whether it comes to us in written or oral form."

Is Paul here speaking about Catholic "Tradition" - the transmission of the Word of God by the church, and especially by Catholic bishops? Or is he referring to something entirely different? First, let's read the verse in context:

"But 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, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle" (2 Thessalonians 2:13-15).

The Apostle Paul exhorted the believers in Thessalonica to "hold the traditions" which he had taught them. The word translated "traditions" simply means "a giving over, a handing down." So Paul is here referring to the teachings which he had "handed down" to the Thessalonians, the truth of the Gospel he mentioned in the previous verse. He had instructed them orally when he was present with them, and by letter when he was away. Paul commands them to keep the doctrines which he had handed on, irrespective of the way they were delivered.

How can we apply this principle in our own time? We too must "hold the traditions" - we must learn, believe, obey and defend the apostolic doctrine, the true Gospel of God.

But what is this apostolic doctrine; how do we receive it? Is this verse teaching us that we who live centuries after the death of Paul and the other apostles, should expect to receive God's Word directly from the mouth of an apostle, just as the Thessalonians did? No, and for a very simple reason -- there are no apostles today.

At issue is not whether God's revelation was initially passed on to the church by the apostles by word of mouth and writing. That is not disputed. Nor do we question whether Christian doctrine should be passed on from one generation to another in both written and oral forms. The Christian religion is, in fact, transmitted by both means. The most vociferous defenders of *sola Scriptura*, just like Catholics, teach doctrine orally (in preaching, teaching, etc) and in writing (tracts, books, etc).

The central question is this: *Are church traditions necessarily identical to apostolic traditions?* Is the pastor or bishop in your church as authoritative as an apostle? Are his sermons and writings "God-breathed" - the very Word of God? During the history of the church, did Christians and their leaders follow exactly the teaching and practices initially taught by the apostles? Have we reached perfection? Or are Jesus' disciples liable to err, neglect certain doctrines, and add foreign ideas and practices?

Just like a ship needs a compass to detect any deviation from its course caused by winds and currents, even so, the church needs an ultimate standard, the apostolic message, because it is forever tossed and disturbed by false doctrines. In other words, the traditions of the church should be subject to correction. But if traditions are regarded as the Word of God, the church cannot correct and reform itself.

What then is the "ultimate rule"? The Holy Spirit moved holy men to write down the divine message in gospels, epistles and other forms of literature. The New Testament, being part of the Holy Scriptures is "God-breathed." We do not merely possess a written record of the apostolic message; we have the God-inspired record -- certain, sure, infallible, the very Word of God! From the Scriptures we can drink the pure water of life; by the Scriptures we can evaluate, and when necessary, amend our traditions.

The first century Christians received God's Word in apostolic speech and epistle. Today the situation has changed; there are no living apostles, yet we still receive their doctrine in the inspired Scriptures even though we cannot hear them speak.

The argument for the Catholic concept of Tradition based on 2nd Thessalonians is erroneous - it is a logical fallacy of ambiguity. The same term, the word "traditions", is used with two different meanings. In Paul's epistle it means one thing (the Gospel message handed on by an apostle to a local church); it means something entirely different in Catholic apologetics (namely the perfect transmission of God's Word in an unwritten form from one generation to another by the universal church). Do not be misled!