

Sola Scriptura and the Regulative Principle of Worship, Chapter 3 The Jewish/Romanist Rejection of *Sola Scriptura*

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The Bible and all the Reformed confessions condemn adding the traditions of men to the word of God. Unfortunately, the principle of *sola scriptura* has been violated throughout church history. Two prime examples of adding traditions to God's word are rabbinic Judaism and Roman Catholicism.

Rabbinic Judaism teaches that when Moses received the written law on Mt. Sinai, he also received a very lengthy unwritten (oral) revelation. This oral revelation was then supposedly passed down to Joshua, the seventy elders, the prophets and the great rabbinic teachers generationally, until it was committed to writing in the Talmud. Although there is no question that God instructed the church before the time of Moses by unwritten words, or that prophecy continued until the close of the canon, the idea of an unwritten divine tradition continuing *after* the close of the canon is clearly unscriptural. Even the Pharisaical idea of an authoritative unwritten tradition functioning as a co-equal authority to written revelation while the canon remained open is condemned by Scripture in many ways. First, while the Jews are repeatedly warned not to add or detract from God's inscripturated word (Dt. 4:2; Pr. 30:5-6; Josh. 1:7-8), there are no warnings or even any remarks regarding an unwritten revelational tradition. Second, commands and warnings regarding obedience, whether found in the law (e.g., Ex. 19:7-8; Dt. 31:9, 12, 46-47) or the prophets (Jer. 36:2, 32), refer either to what was already written or to what became inscripturated prophecy. There is not a shred of evidence in the Old Testament for an authoritative tradition. Biblical teaching assumes that there is not an independent source of oral communication standing alongside of the written revelation. Third, Jesus repeatedly condemned the Jews for adding human traditions and doctrines to God's word (e.g., Mt. 15:1-3). Fourth, the Talmud (which in English translation runs to 34 large volumes) is full of contradictions, unethical teaching and blasphemous nonsense. It explicitly contradicts many of the major teachings of the Bible. Modern Judaism is not a religion of the Old Testament but a religion founded upon human tradition. Like various cults, Judaism has transferred the infallibility, absolute authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures to a human collection of writings.

The Roman Catholic Church is very similar to Judaism on the issue of authority. Romanists teach that the Bible *and* tradition as interpreted by the Church are the final seat of authority in religion. The Council of Trent says: "Seeing clearly that this truth and discipline are contained in the written books, and the unwritten traditions" (4th sess.; 1546).¹ The Second Vatican Council says,

This tradition which comes from the apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down.... For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church

¹ "The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent" in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 [1876, 1931]), 2:80.

constantly moves forward toward the fulness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her (*Dei Verbum*, 8; 1962-1965).²

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that the church “does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.”³ The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the hierarchy (i.e., the bishops and the supreme Pontiff), with the help of the Holy Spirit, picks, authorizes and adds its own authoritative tradition to the written form of revelation. Romanists do not believe that the church hierarchy is making up doctrine but simply setting forth the oral teachings of Jesus and the apostles that were never inscripturated. These teachings were given to the bishops as a parallel source of authority.

Romanist teaching regarding the authority of tradition gives the church hierarchy an authority over the written word of God. Christ emphatically condemned the use of tradition as a source of authority (cf. Mk. 7:5-13), because whenever tradition is set up alongside of Scripture, it eventually is placed above Scripture, and is then used to interpret Scripture. Human tradition was the chief reason that the nation of Israel in the days of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages became apostate. Throughout its history the papal church multiplied traditions until both the gospel and apostolic worship were buried under a pile of will worship and false doctrine.

Why is the Romanist doctrine of an unwritten tradition (as a co-equal authority with Scripture that somehow is kept pure by the church hierarchy and then delivered to the laity throughout history) unbiblical? There are many reasons why the Roman Catholic doctrine of an authoritative tradition must be rejected. First, the doctrine of the perfection, completeness and sufficiency of Scripture renders an authoritative tradition or further revelation from God unnecessary. Second, God’s inscripturated word forbids adding or detracting from the completed canon. Third, many of the Romanist traditions that have been added as authoritative doctrine and practice explicitly contradict the clear teaching of the Bible. Fourth, many Roman Catholic traditions contradict each other. Fifth, most of the additions of the papal church had their origins long after the death of the apostles. Sixth, human tradition is dependent upon sinful, fallible men and thus is obscure, unprovable and indefinite.⁴ An “authoritative” human tradition requires faith

² Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herden and Herden, 1966), 116.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 31.

⁴ Charles Hodge writes, “It is of course conceded that Christ and his Apostles said and did much that is not recorded in the Scriptures; and it is further admitted that if we had any certain knowledge of such unrecorded instructions, they would be of equal authority with what is written in the Scriptures. But Protestants maintain that they were not intended to constitute a part of the permanent rule of faith to the Church. They were designed for the men of that generation. The showers which fell a thousand years ago, watered the earth and rendered it fruitful for men then living. They cannot now be gathered up and made available for us. They did not constitute a reservoir for the supply of future generations. In like manner the unrecorded teachings of Christ and his Apostles did their work. They were not designed for our instruction. It is as impossible to learn what they were, as it is to gather up the leaves which adorned and enriched the earth when Christ walked in the garden of Gethsemane. This impossibility arises out of the limitations of our nature, as well as its corruption consequent on the fall. Man has not the clearness of perception, the retentiveness of memory, or the power of presentation, to enable him (without supernatural aid) to give a trustworthy account of a discourse once heard, a few years or even months after its delivery. And that this should be done over and over from month to month for thousands of years, is an impossibility. If to this be added the difficulty in the way of this oral transmission, arising from the blindness of men to the things of the Spirit, which prevents their understanding what they hear, and from the disposition to pervert and misrepresent the truth to suit their own prejudices and purposes, it must be acknowledged that tradition cannot be a reliable source of knowledge of religious truth. This is universally acknowledged and acted upon, except by Romanists. No one pretends to

in sinful man's fluctuating opinions. Only toward Scripture, which is perfect, complete, sufficient and perspicuous, can we direct our faith, for it is the very word of Christ and gives us a full assurance. Seventh, the Bible itself condemns all doctrines and worship practices that are not derived from the Scriptures. "In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Mt. 15:9; Isa. 29:13). Turretin writes,

Nor can it be replied that the Pharisaical traditions are rejected, not the apostolic. All doctrines taught by men and not contained in the Scriptures are rejected and the assumption is gratuitous that there are any apostolic traditions out of the Scriptures. Believers are called to the law and the testimony (Is. 8:20) and destruction is denounced against those who do not speak according to it. Nor can traditions be meant by the testimony because God everywhere rejects them. Either the law itself (often called "the testimony") is meant as a testimony of God exegetically or the writings of the prophets which were added to the law.⁵

Roman Catholic apologists attempt to justify their doctrine of an authoritative tradition by appealing to certain passages of Scripture. A brief examination of some of these passages is needed to reveal their true meaning. As we consider these passages we must keep in mind that the apostles had a unique authority. The apostles' *oral* teaching was authoritative and binding. Therefore, those men and churches who sat under the teaching of the apostles were obligated to obey the apostles' Spirit-inspired instruction as the very word of God, a rule for faith and life. However, the fact that the apostles could orally teach inspired authoritative truth while they were still alive (and that the churches were morally obligated to obey their teaching) does not at all prove that there is an oral authoritative tradition that is somehow preserved among the Romanist hierarchy throughout history. Scripture alone must define the phrase "apostolic tradition." Furthermore, why would the God of infinite wisdom commit some of his revelation to writing and the rest to oral tradition? While written revelation is easily preserved from corruption, oral tradition is easily corrupted and lost. Also, when a bishop or pope comes up with a new teaching from the supposed trough of unwritten apostolic tradition, how are we to determine whether or not he simply made up that doctrine out of his own imagination? Are we supposed to simply accept his own word on it? Is this not a blind faith in the words of men? The Romanist foundation of an authoritative tradition rests upon its doctrine of the special authority of the church (i.e., the sacerdotal hierarchy). It is a doctrine that in itself is totally contrary to the Bible. The only way that we can know with absolute certainty what the apostles taught is to read their inscripturated writings.

In 1 Corinthians 11:2 Paul says: "keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you." Is Paul here agreeing with the papal doctrine regarding a body of unwritten tradition transmitted by a succession of bishops from generation to generation? No, not at all. Paul is simply instructing the Corinthian believers to obey the doctrine and exhortations that he had given them when he was personally present among them. The word (*paradosis*) translated as "tradition" or "ordinance" (KJV), when used in reference to the rule of faith in the New Testament, *always* refers to the immediate instructions of inspired men. "When used in the modern sense of the

determine what Luther and Calvin, Latimer and Cranmer, taught, except from contemporaneous written records. Much less will any sane man pretend to know what Moses and the prophets taught except from their own writings" (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 1:21).

⁵ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:139.

word *tradition*, it is always in reference to what is human and untrustworthy, Gal. 1, 14. Col. 2, 8, and frequently in the gospels of the traditions of the elders.”⁶

A favorite proof text of Romanist apologists is 2 Thessalonians 2:15, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught whether by word or by epistle.” Note that Paul refers to oral or spoken doctrine as well as written teaching. Doesn’t this passage perfectly fit the papal doctrine of a two-fold revelation: one written and one oral? No, absolutely not! Once again Paul is referring to inspired teaching given personally. This passage does not support the idea of a secret teaching handed down through the centuries by bishops. “Paul is not encouraging the Thessalonians to receive some tradition that had been delivered to them via second or third hand reports. On the contrary, *he was ordering them to receive as infallible truth only what they had heard directly from his own lips.*”⁷

In order to show the absurdity of the Romanist position let us consider one more point. Assume for a moment that the Roman Catholic position is true, that a large deposit of apostolic doctrine was given to the church orally for its own sanctification. This orally delivered doctrine is inspired, authoritative and thus all believers are required to obey it without reservation. If the church was given this great deposit of apostolic teaching, then why not simply write it all down so that everyone could immediately benefit from its divine wisdom? If this teaching is authoritative and required, why dish it out in little snippets over a period of almost two thousand years? Why not simply place it all out in the open for all to immediately benefit from it? Why did the church wait until A.D. 1079 to learn that God required the celibacy of the priesthood? Why wait until A.D. 1854 to learn about the immaculate conception of Mary? It is obvious from both the biblical and historical evidence that the papal doctrine of an authoritative tradition is merely a clever human attempt at justifying centuries of man-made doctrines and practices. The Romish doctrine of authoritative tradition is merely a human invention used to shift authority from the Bible to the church hierarchy. The reason that the pope and bishops dish out small amounts of the supposed oral apostolic tradition here and there throughout history is that it gives them incredible power. When some doctrine or practice is needed to control the laity and increase the hierarchy’s power, a new doctrine or practice is simply made up or discovered by a church bureaucrat and then imposed on the laity. This gives the Roman Catholic hierarchy a cult-like power over their flock. The fact that many Roman Catholic bishops and popes may have been very sincere in their beliefs does not detract from the fact that their doctrine of authoritative tradition is a doctrine of demons. Beware of false prophets; their doctrine can devour you (cf. Mt. 7:15).

As a result of such teaching regarding authority, the Roman Catholic Church has more in common with a pagan cult than apostolic Christianity. Turretin writes,

She [the Roman Catholic Church] is apostate and heretical, having failed from the faith once delivered to the saints and teaching various deadly heresies and thrusting them forward to be believed under the pain of a curse. Such are the doctrines concerning justification by works and their merit, human satisfactions and indulgences, transubstantiation, and the sacrifice of the Mass, sin and free will, sufficient grace, the possible observance of the law, the ecumenical pontiff and primacy of the pope.... she is idolatrous and superstitious, both with respect to the object which she worships and with

⁶ Charles Hodge, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1958 [1857]), 206.

⁷ John MacArthur, “The Sufficiency of the Written Word” in Don Kistler, ed., *Sola Scriptura* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 177.

respect to the mode in which she worships. With respect to the object, inasmuch as besides God (who as alone omniscient, omnipotent and best ought to be the sole object of worship and invocation), she venerates and adores creatures also which are by nature not gods (Gal. 4:8): as the blessed virgin, angels, defunct saints, the consecrated host, the sacrament, the cross, the pope, the relics of Christ and of the saints. With respect of the mode, in the making, worship and adoration of effigies and images, so solemnly prohibited by the law of God. And these things appear not from the private opinion of teachers, but from the public sanctions and constant practice.⁸

If the papal church is to be cleansed of its damnable heresies and gross, blasphemous idolatries, it must return to the biblical doctrine of *sola scriptura*. The root must first be cured before the diseased and poisonous fruit is replaced.

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⁸ Frances Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3:123-125.