

“And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.” (Gal 1:14)

✠ Lecture IV: False Traditions ✠

“No clear notion of the true meaning of Tradition can be reached without constantly keeping in mind the well-known condemnation of ‘human traditions’ by the Lord Himself. The one Holy Tradition, which constitutes the self-identity of the Church through the ages and is the organic and visible expression of the life of the Spirit in the Church, is not to be confused with the inevitable, often creative and positive, sometimes sinful, and always relative accumulation of human traditions...” (John Meyendorff, *Tradition and traditions*. St. Vladimir’s Theological quarterly vol.6 – 1962)

✠ Human tradition:

This is the false tradition also called ‘tradition of men’:

- “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the **tradition of men** not according to Christ.” (Col 2:8)
- “For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the **tradition of men** – the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.” (Mark 7:8,13)

✠ Holy Tradition:

In distinction to the tradition of men, the Holy Bible calls us to obey Holy Tradition that has God as its source. In contrast to man-made traditions, Apostolic Tradition is our foundation in the Church:

- “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and **hold the traditions** which you were taught, whether by word, or our epistle.” (2Thess 2:15)
- “But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly **and not according to the tradition which he received from us.**” (2Thess 3:6)
- “Now I praise you brethren, that you remember me in all things **and keep the traditions as I delivered them to you.**” (1Cor 11:2)

This Sound and Holy Tradition has the Holy Spirit as its source and is characterized by:

1. Not contradicting the Holy Scripture.
2. Not contradicting other Holy Traditions.
3. The acceptance by all Orthodox Churches.

✠ The Single-Source Theory of Holy Tradition:

In response to various controversies within the early Church, especially the threat of Gnosticism, a “Traditional” method of understanding certain passages of Holy Scripture began to develop. Second-century patristic theologians such as Irenaeus of Lyons began to develop the idea of an authorized way of interpreting certain texts of Holy Scripture, which he argued went back to the time of the Apostles themselves. Holy Scripture could not be allowed to be interpreted in any arbitrary or random way: it had to be interpreted within the context of the historical continuity of the Christian Church. The parameters of its interpretation were historically fixed and “given”. “Tradition” here simply means “a traditional way of interpreting Holy Scripture within the community of faith”. This is a single-source theory of theology: Theology is based upon scripture, and “Tradition” refers to a “Traditional way of interpreting Holy Scripture”.

Note the emphasis that is placed upon the role of the Church as a living organism, which passes down the content of the faith, based on Holy Scripture, to each generation. “Tradition” is here understood as a living and active process of passing on the Christian faith, rather than a static source of revelation, independent of Holy Scripture. (Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: an introduction*. Blackwell Publishers)

✦ The Dual-Source Theory of Holy Tradition:

In the 14th and 15th centuries a somewhat different understanding of Holy Tradition from that noted above developed. “Tradition” was understood to be a separate and distinct source of revelation, **in addition to Holy Scripture**. Holy Scripture, it was argued, was silent on a number of points – but God had providentially arranged for a second source of revelation to supplement this deficiency: a stream of unwritten Holy Tradition, going back to the Apostles themselves. This Holy Tradition was passed from one generation to another within the Church. This is a dual-source theory of theology: Theology is based on two distinct sources: Holy Scripture and unwritten Holy Tradition.

A belief, which is not to be found in Holy Scripture, may thus, on the basis of this dual-source theory, be justified by an appeal to an unwritten Holy Tradition. This position was defended strongly by the Council of Trent, which was charged with stating and defending the Roman Catholic position against the threat posed by the Reformation. Trent ruled that Holy Scripture could not be regarded as the only source of revelation; Holy Tradition was a vital supplement, which Protestants irresponsibly denied. “All saving truths and rules of conduct . . . are contained in the written books and in unwritten traditions, received from the mouth of Christ Himself or from the apostles themselves”. Interestingly, however, the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) **seems to move away from this approach**, in favor of the “traditional interpretation of Holy Scripture” approach, noted above. (Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: an introduction*. Blackwell Publishers)

✦ The Total Rejection of Holy Tradition:

For radical theologians of the 16th century (the Anabaptists), every individual had the right to interpret Scripture as he or she pleased, subject to guidance of the Holy Spirit. The way was thus opened for individualism, with the private judgment of the individual raised above the corporate judgment of the Church. Thus **the radicals** rejected the practice of infant baptism as non-Scriptural. Similarly, doctrines such as the Trinity and the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ were rejected as resting upon inadequate Holy Scriptural foundations. The radicals had no place whatsoever for Holy Tradition. As Sebastian Franck wrote in 1503: “Foolish Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Gregory – of whom not one even knew the Lord, so help me God, nor was sent by God to teach. Rather, they were all apostles of Antichrist.” (Alister E. McGrath, *Christian theology: an introduction*. Blackwell Publishers)

Protestants react violently to the idea of Holy Tradition simply because the only form of it they have generally encountered is the distorted concept of Holy Tradition found in Roman Catholicism. Contrary to the Roman view of Holy Tradition – which is personified by the Pope, and develops new dogmas without apostolic foundation, such as papal infallibility (and Purgatory) – the Orthodox do not believe Holy Tradition (dogmas) changes or “develops”. Certainly when the Church is faced with a heresy, she may be forced to define more precisely the difference between truth and error; but the truth is never altered. It may be said that Holy Tradition **expands** and **matures**, but only in the sense that as the Church moves through history, she doesn’t forget her experiences along the way. She remembers the saints that arise in her, and she preserves the writings of those who accurately stated the faith. But the Faith itself was **“Once for all delivered to the saints.” (Jude 3)** (Fr. John Whiteford, *Sola Scriptura*. Conciliar Press. 1996)

It is understood that new issues arise in each generation that require the opinion of the Church so as people do not get confused. The Church, therefore, gives the opinion of religion on these matters through her authority of teaching and legislation by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Through successive generations the Church teaching in a certain generation turns into Tradition inherited by the following generations. (Pope Shenouda III, *Comparative Theology*)

✦ According to the New Westminster dictionary of the Holy Bible, The term ‘Tradition’, however, came to be used in a good sense of the Apostolic teaching handed down in the Church **either by the oral word or by letter (1Cor 11:2; 15:3; 2Thess 2:15)**.
