

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Last Sunday as we honored the Blessed Virgin and gave thanks to God for her role in our salvation, for her part in giving flesh to her Savior and ours, I mentioned two dogmas that Rome has declared: the Immaculate Conception and Mary's Assumption into heaven. These new teachings Rome now passes down as unquestioned dogma not unlike what the Jews had done in our Gospel lesson. For Rome, these new dogmas were made up, not just because it was fitting for Jesus' mother, but also because it was fitting to honor Jesus in this way, for example, that He might "have a Mother on earth who would never be without the splendor of holiness." Rome asserts that these weren't merely declared dogmas in recent times, but they were passed down and "received from our ancestors" (*Ineffabilis Deus*). These, they say, are tradition.

For the Jews, similarly, some of their traditions were originally meant for a good purpose — to help people from transgressing the Law. And so, they made up their traditions as a fence around the Law, as added protection. The problem with both, of course, is that they trample on the very thing they are trying to protect. The cult of Mary takes away honor and glory from Jesus as Rome's faithful are pointed to Mary that she might "obtain pardon for the sinner, health for the sick, strength of heart for the weak, consolation for the afflicted, help for those in danger" (*Ineffabilis Deus*). With Luther, we confess: "The declaration of the papists that human traditions serve for the forgiveness of sins or merit salvation is unchristian and condemned" (Smalcald Articles, Third Part, Article XV:1). The Jews before them disregarded the actual Law of God in order to keep their traditions. "[I]n vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

I hope you heard it ... "their traditions," "*the tradition of the elders,*" "*the tradition of men.*" Luther says "human traditions." Let's be clear. In the Gospel, Jesus is not scolding the Pharisees and scribes for all traditions — not even all manmade traditions. Rather, Jesus upbraids them for those traditions that seek to supplant God's word and so make "*void the word of God.*"

We agree: traditions are not necessarily bad, after all, traditions are merely beliefs or practices passed down from one generation to the next, handed over from one person to another, delivered to another. Traditions fill our lives, and we generally find them quite meaningful and memorable: family traditions, holiday traditions, and so forth. Traditions in our personal lives we sometimes call habits or routines, and without them we would find life much more taxing. Edgar Rice Burroughs of Tarzan fame wrote, "We are, all of us, creatures of habit" (*The Beasts of Tarzan*).

As I mentioned, traditions are things handed over, and actually that includes God's Word. It, of course, is not a manmade tradition, though Scripture was written

down by men. But the holy writers were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21), and so, Scripture is Divine. St. Paul says, “*For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you* [“delivered to you — that’s the ‘tradition’ word] *that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread ...*” (1 Cor. 11:23). The Lord’s Supper, handed over to us from Christ through the apostles, you see, is tradition. Nothing wrong with that! Again, Paul says, “*I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received*” (1 Cor. 15:3) — more tradition received from the Old Testament Scriptures, delivered to us by the apostolic writers, and we to others: “*that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures*” (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Paul explicitly calls these things traditions: “*I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you*” (1 Cor. 11:2).

Obviously, there is no problem with this Divine tradition, but what about manmade traditions? Jesus will deal with the elder’s “eating with defiled hands” tradition in the following verses, and we’ll take that up next Sunday. But before He treats that, Jesus scolds the Pharisees about overturning the dictates of the God-given 4th Commandment — Honor your father and your mother—with their manmade tradition of Corban. By elevating their church law above God’s law, they were “*rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish [their] tradition.*”

I’ve heard the accusation leveled against us Lutherans, in particular with respect to worship things. Not all that long ago, it seemed as if that was the punching bag in church. They were even called “the worship wars.” The complaint was that traditional worship was dry, dull, dead. These traditions must be rejected, they said; the rituals must be eliminated in our church; everything must be new, fresh, shiny, alive! Out with the basilica-styled church — like Zion — in with contemporary architecture; out with hymnbooks and hymns, in with projectors and screens and PowerPoint slides and pop songs; out with the organ and organist, in with guitars and trap drums and worship leaders; and so forth.

People like us, the accusation continued, made traditional worship law above God’s command, and therefore, we are those “*people [who] honors [the Lord] with their lips, but their heart is far from Him*”; people like us are those who worship the Lord “*in vain ..., teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.*”

And, indeed, before we simply dismiss such accusations, we should evaluate them. And if it is true, that we set manmade traditions above God’s word, we should repent and cut them out of our worship. Luther was certainly one who pruned the unscriptural dead branches out of the liturgy. It would be the Lutheran thing for us to do also.

So what of our Divine liturgy? Well, much of it, sung and spoken, far from supplanting God's word, is simply God's word. Much of it comes straight from the pages of Scripture.

What of things like the creeds? Are these not manmade traditions? To be sure, the creeds we confess are not direct quotes from Holy Scripture, but they are scriptural; they express a true summary of the apostolic message of our creation and redemption and salvation in God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are not a rejection of God's Word but a powerful affirmation of it; therefore, these "we embrace with deepest reverence" writes Lutheran reformer Martin Chemnitz. They are, as church father Tertullian calls them, "the rule of faith" (Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part 1:246-7).

Other things, like the words of our confession of sins and absolution and prayers may have been written by men, but these are commanded and authorized by God. "*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them*" (John 20:23). And again, "*I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions ... in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands*" (1 Tim. 2:1, 8). Thus, when we prayed today that God would "defend [His] Church from all false teaching and error" so that His "faithful people may confess [Him] to be the only true God and rejoice in [His] good gifts of life and salvation," this tradition is surely not contrary to God's word or will.

Perhaps the thing that should cause you the most worry is the sermon, after all, it is written by a man, a very fallible man, I know only too well. But that's the very reason that care is taken to train up pastors; that's the reason why we ask our pastors to subscribe unconditionally to our Symbols, as we've been talking about in Adult Bible class, because they confess the Word of truth purely and plainly; that's the reason why you are exhorted to listen carefully and test your pastor's words by the "only rule and norm according to which all teachings, together with <all> teachers, should be evaluated and judged," namely, "the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testament alone" (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm:1).

Other things one sees and hears in our church: rites and ceremonies, our church building with her gothic arches, stained glass windows and statues, the altar and its adornments, vestments and paraments, musical instruments, bowing, kneeling, making the sign of the cross — these things are not necessary things; they are not a part of our worship because God commands them, and we could do without them; but they are lovely and beautiful and helpful, and God leaves them free. "*For freedom Christ has set us free*" (Gal. 5:1). Therefore, we are free to surround ourselves with this beauty as we immerse ourselves in the grace of God, in Christ,

who “loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”

I hope you're like me when it comes to all these manmade traditions found here at Zion: our ceremonies, our building, the crucifixes, statues, and stained glass, etc. I love them, for they all help to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, and they encourage us to tune our ears to God's tradition delivered to us concerning Christ: that He died for you; He was buried and raised from the dead for you; His victory is now ours as we are united to Him by water and the word; He gives us a foretaste of that victory in His feast of victory. Therefore, let us ever come to His house and see! Let us rejoice in what He has delivered over to us by Word and Sacrament. Hear and understand! Eat and drink! Confess and sing!

And in that good Lutheran tradition of song, I point you in advance to these words of prayer that we will sing: “Restrain, O Lord, the human pride That seeks to thrust Your truth aside Or with some man-made thoughts or things Would dim the words Your Spirit sings.

“Stay with us, Lord, and keep us true; Preserve our faith our whole life through—Your Word alone our heart's defense, The church's glorious confidence.” (LSB565).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.