

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

How does the fiddler keep his balance on the roof top asks Tevia in the musical by that name? The answer: “Tradition! Tradition! Tradition!” Tradition for papas, tradition for mamas, tradition for sons, tradition for daughters. Tradition was how this little Jewish village in Czarist Russia kept its identity. “Without tradition,” Tevia says, “our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof.” Of course, not mentioned in the song was anything about Corban.

The Jews were very interested in traditions in Jesus’ day: traditions about ceremonially washing hands before eating, *“holding to the tradition of the elders,”* traditions about *“the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.”* You see, the Jews had established a whole system of rules — traditions — as a fence around the law of Moses. The idea was if you have this extra protection of the fence, you’ll not even get close to trespassing the Law. That’s why *“the Pharisees and scribes”* asked Jesus almost accusingly about His disciples, *“Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders?”*

But Jesus was not going to play by their rules; He wasn’t going to let them define what is or is not permitted, especially when their traditions rejected the very Law they were supposed to be guarding. He called them out for their hypocrisy.

*“Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ You [set aside] the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men. ... You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!”* “Protect us from this, heavenly Father!” (Luther, Lord’s Prayer, 1st Petition)

Now Jesus will deal with the *“eating with defiled hands”* tradition in next week’s Gospel. In this week’s Gospel, He points out their hypocrisy with His example concerning the fourth commandment. The Pharisees were teaching that you weren’t even permitted to honor your father and mother if you say to them, “What I would have used on your behalf, I’m giving it to God.” That’s *“Corban,”* and that, the Pharisees taught, superseded the commandment. So, Jesus said, you make *“void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.”*

This penchant by religious people toward making new laws, establishing new doctrines, was at the heart of the conflict between Rome and Luther during the Reformation. Popes and councils had established unscriptural teachings concerning all sorts of issues — Luther’s 95 Theses called out Rome on the topics of indulgences and purgatory, for example. The Roman teachings on the “Sacrifice of the Mass” particularly riled Luther. It wasn’t just their teaching on transubstantiation or their

withholding the cup from the laity, but that they taught that the priests were repeatedly offering up Christ in an unbloody sacrifice as a good work before God that caused Luther to say of Rome that they were holding the church in a new Babylonian Captivity, for this teaching is not Biblical. It was (and is) but a new way to “*void the word of God by [their] tradition that [they] have handed down.*” Thus, when called to account for his writings at the Diet of Worms, Luther famously said, “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God” (Luther’s Works, 32:112).

Indeed, we as Lutherans are bound by that same Word of God. We have pledged ourselves to this Word, both “the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.” We call them “the pure, clear fountain of Israel.” And we say of them that they “are the only true standard or norm by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged.” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm, 3) Thus, we will pray shortly as we sing: “In these last days of great distress Grant us, dear Lord, true steadfastness That pure we keep, till life is spent, Your holy Word and Sacrament” (LSB585).

But our fidelity to the Word of God does not mean that we reject all traditions. In fact, the word “tradition” simply means teachings, commandments, or stories that have been handed down or passed on. In this way, even the Scripture itself is tradition, as St. Paul commended the Corinthian Christians for maintaining “*the traditions even as I delivered them to you*” (1 Cor. 11:2), and he’s talking about the things he was teaching them, which St. Peter would later call “Scripture.”

A bit later, Paul tells the Corinthian Christians, “*I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: 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). Here Paul delivered, he handed over, he “traditioned” the Good News of Jesus, crucified, buried, and risen from the dead for them to them, and that Jesus did it ALL as had been foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures. Similarly, a bit earlier, Paul had told them, “*I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you*” (1 Cor. 11:23). In this case, he “traditioned” to them the institution of the Lord’s Supper, “*that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body’*” (1 Cor. 11:23-4) and so forth.

But what about traditions that are not Scripture, *per se*? Of course, the creeds “we embrace with deepest reverence” as expressing a true summary of the Scriptures’ message of salvation in Jesus Christ. (Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*,

Part 1:246-7) But other traditions, too, we do not reject outright, whether they be the writings of the church fathers, or their practices based on Scripture and apostolic practice, or rites and practices that have been handed down from one generation to the next, or even the words of your own pastor — he is passing on what he has received, right? Indeed, in all these we measure their usefulness according to the Biblical witness. And this is as the church has taught from the earliest times.

Augustine, for example, taught: “Other writers,” that is, other than the Biblical authors, “I read in such a way that, no matter how great they are in holiness or learning, I do not consider a thing true because they have thought it so but because they have been able to persuade me either through other canonical [that is, Biblical] authors or by some credible reason that they do not depart from the truth.” That sounds a bit like Luther, doesn’t it? And, indeed, he quoted this passage in his defense before Charles V at Worms. Again, Augustine wrote that the Scriptures as we have them were “drawn up that we might, according to them, freely judge concerning other writings of either believers or unbelievers.” And again, he says, “I do not hold the letters of Cyprian [an early Church father] as canonical [that is, measuring up to the Biblical standard], but I evaluate them by the canonical ones [that is, by the Bible itself]; and what in them agrees with the authority of the divine Scriptures I receive with his compliments, but what does not agree I reject with his permission.” (Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part 1:259-60)

This is the way we should treat all writings that purport to convey divine truths, whether by an early church father, a reformation era reformer, or your own pastor. Hold them up to the divine light of the Word of God. We just sang, “Lord, help us ever to retain The Catechism’s doctrine plain As Luther taught the Word of truth In simple style to tender youth” (LSB865). This is no prayer for “*vain worship*,” “*teaching as doctrines the commandments of men*,” as I’ve heard people accuse Lutherans of doing. No, the Catechism’s doctrine is nothing other than Biblical doctrine.

Similarly with regard to traditional practices, like infant baptism. Shining the Word of God on this practice confirms it as Biblical, even though there is not an explicit command to baptize infants. But there is a Scriptural-based theology that affirms it. Or traditional practices like making the sign of the cross or not — here the Word of God neither commands or forbids it. So you are free to do it ... or not.

Or the rights and ceremonies of our worship, or our church building and its adornments, or vestments and paraments, or musical instruments. These are free also, for the true church does not reside in these external things, but in the one thing needful — Jesus Christ, the Rock upon which the church is built, and His Gospel proclaimed by apostles and prophets (Matt. 7:24; Eph. 2:20). His is the only name under heaven by which we are saved (Acts 4:11-12). Lord, help us ever

to hallow this name. The church is found where the good news of Jesus is purely preached as Paul did in our Epistle, that *“Christ 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.”*

And in my humble opinion, the worship here, our building and appointments, the crucifixes, statues, and stained glass, all help to keep our eyes fixed on that Rock, Jesus Christ and Him crucified and risen for us sinners. Look and see! Hear and understand! Eat and drink! Confess and sing!

There’s a lot of tradition at Zion — good tradition, a tradition that keeps things right side up and acknowledges that we are the clay and not the potter, that we are sinners and not the Holy One of Israel, a tradition that supports the Gospel and does not supplant it, that focuses our eyes on the Word incarnate full of grace and truth, a tradition that not only points us to the mystical union, by Baptism, of Christ and His bride, the Church, but also to the sacramental union of Christ’s body and blood under bread and wine given for us, for our forgiveness, life, and salvation.

And in the good Lutheran tradition of song, I close with these words of prayer that you will sing shortly: “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.