

Chapter 9

The Word of God vs. the Traditions of Men

Admittedly, the doctrine of universal reconciliation, also referred to as Christian universalism, represents a major departure from current Christian orthodoxy, not to mention centuries of Christian tradition. At the same time, I do maintain that this doctrine is Scriptural and definitely not a departure from the orthodox Christian theology of the first four centuries of the Church's existence.

To be sure, my credentials do not even come close to matching those of the majority of evangelical pastors, seminary professors, and theologians. This deficiency, however, can also be regarded in some respects as an advantage in discovering truth in the Scriptures. Theological errors often arise as a result of approaching the Scriptures with preconceived notions and from the point of view of one who has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Jesus had great respect for the Scriptures, but interpreted them in ways which emphasized the spirit rather than the letter of the Law. The Scribes and Pharisees viewed Jesus as a threat to their authority. They were jealous of his popularity. Instead of listening to what Jesus was teaching, and reexamining their views based on this new information, they became defensive and were blinded to the truth.

In 1517, when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany, he was expressing a minority opinion. In fact, he may have been the only person in the world at that time who believed many of the doctrines outlined in that document. He believed that Christian doctrine should be based on the authority of the Scriptures alone. When we cede to religious authorities the sole right to interpret the Scriptures and formulate church doctrine, we are in greater danger of falling into heresy than when we are allowed to read and interpret the Scriptures for ourselves.

When Christian doctrine becomes institutionalized in the form of official creeds and formal doctrinal statements, there is a tendency among church and denominational leaders to conform to those teachings out of loyalty to their respective church organizations and in order to maintain their positions of authority. The individual members of those congregations are reluctant to express their honest doubts and questions regarding those official teachings for fear of being criticized or even ostracized. Church members want to be loved and accepted by others in their congregations. As a matter of fact, these psychological and social considerations are often the primary reasons for joining a local church. For many church members these factors are more important than the church's specific doctrinal positions.

Have you ever considered why the majority of individuals in any given Christian denomination all tend to interpret the Scriptures in exactly the same way? Is it because they, by some extremely odd coincidence, all study the Scriptures with an open mind and independently arrive at exactly the same conclusions? Or is it because they cede their right to interpret the Scriptures for themselves, and instead rely upon the interpretations provided to them by their teachers and pastors? This is how Christian theology becomes institutionalized into systems of thought that eventually become "cast in granite" and resistant to change.

I am not saying that we should completely disregard centuries of Christian tradition. Christian pastors, teachers and theologians have served an indispensable purpose over the centuries, and have laid an impressive foundation on which we can build. Ignoring this heritage would be ludicrous. It would be like starting from scratch and trying to build an advanced technological society by throwing out every

scrap of scientific research and starting again with the re-invention of the wheel. Pastors, teachers and seminary professors provide an important link to the past and are necessary for guiding us in our study of the Scriptures. It is important to remember, however, that Luke commended the Christians in Berea for examining the Scriptures to verify that what Paul was teaching them was indeed the truth (Acts 17:11).

When we are presented with new information from an outside source or from our own individual study of the Scriptures we should be open to fresh revelations from God. We should never be afraid to question traditionally held beliefs. We should never be afraid to ask honest questions and express honest doubts. We should embrace truth, no matter what the source. The truth is always our friend, never our enemy. Jesus is the way, the TRUTH, and the life. In my opinion the truth will lead us to Jesus.

Before the New Testament Scriptures were written and canonized, questions of church doctrine were settled by the Apostles who had been with Christ during His earthly ministry and were directly commissioned by Christ to proclaim the Gospel. Initially, the head of the Church at Jerusalem was Peter, to whom Christ entrusted the "*keys of the Kingdom*," symbolizing Peter's authority over the Church, presumably in both temporal and doctrinal matters (see Matt. 16:19). The Apostle Paul on many occasions was forced to defend his apostleship, mainly because he did not walk with Christ during Christ's earthly ministry and was not directly commissioned by Christ before Christ's ascension into Heaven. To some, Paul's gospel of salvation by grace apart from works was a departure from what was being taught by the other Apostles. In Galatians 1 & 2, Paul asserted his right to apostleship on the basis of his direct confrontation with Christ on the road to Damascus, and he emphasized the fact that the gospel he preached was taught to him directly by Jesus Christ during his time in the wilderness of Arabia. Nevertheless, Paul felt compelled to go to Jerusalem and share his views with the Apostles there, just to make sure he was preaching the truth and had not been laboring in vain. In Acts 1:12-26 we learn that when a new Apostle was selected as a replacement for Judas, one of the primary qualifications was that the candidate had to have been a disciple of Jesus during His earthly ministry, from John's baptism up to the time of Christ's ascension. The reason there are no more apostles in the Church today is that there are no more living witnesses of the resurrection of Christ who were directly commissioned as Apostles by Christ Himself.

The most accurate testimony we have today of what the apostles taught is the New Testament, which was written by the Apostles themselves or by those who were closely associated with them. As you are aware, members of the Roman Catholic Church, instead of basing doctrine on the teachings of the New Testament alone, also rely on traditions adopted and handed down by a succession of Apostles that continues to this day. Nowhere in the Bible is it taught that the keys of the Kingdom were to be passed to successive generations of Apostles. Proof of this lies in the fact that many doctrines taught in later generations by those apostolic successors are in direct conflict with the original teachings of the Apostles, as recorded in the New Testament.

Although bishops, pastors and teachers were appointed by the Apostles and their successors to oversee the affairs of the church and its doctrines, authority was never given for them to formulate new doctrines. Instead, it was their job to preserve the integrity of what had already been taught to them by the original Apostles. Today, the New Testament is the only reliable source of those teachings. When confronted with "later traditions" which contradict the teachings of the New Testament Scriptures, priority should always be given to the Scriptures themselves.

Interestingly enough, the doctrine of endless punishment in Hell was totally absent from any of the Church's credal declarations during the first 400 years of Church history. Most of the early Church fathers, including Pantaenus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Didymus the Blind, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Theodoret, believed in Universal Restoration. It would be fair to mention that a small minority of the Church Fathers believed in endless punishment, while others believed in the annihilation of the wicked. Some had no definite opinion. The fact remains, however, that as the early creeds were developed,

numerous doctrines were fiercely disputed at various Church councils and gatherings, without even a whisper of condemnation of the doctrine of Universal Reconciliation.

With the preceding in mind, which traditions should we conform to? Should we base our doctrines on the traditions of the first four centuries?, or those of the next eleven centuries prior to the Reformation, commonly called the Dark Ages?, or those of the Reformation period?, or those of the Christian Fundamentalist Movement of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries?

Jesus had harsh words for the Pharisees who had substituted their human traditions for the actual commands of God. The Pharisees were extremely self-righteous and they set up many man-made rules which were primarily used as a basis for religious exclusion. In the words of Jesus, they *“have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”* (Mark 7:8)

The obvious point I am making here is that rather than trying to conform to the various human traditions, wouldn't it make better sense to allow the Holy Spirit to guide you into truth as you study the Scriptures for yourself? Can God be trusted to guide you correctly and not lead you astray? Of course He can. This does not mean that all of us will arrive at the same set of theological conclusions. We will end up disagreeing on many unimportant doctrinal issues, but we will all be brought closer to Christ Himself and the truths that matter most. The amazing thing about Christianity is that despite huge differences of opinion among its adherents on a variety of issues, it seems to “work” wonderfully for those who seek to establish a personal relationship with God through Christ and apply the teachings of Scripture to their daily lives.