

Jesus Versus The Rabbis

One of the chief controversies between Christ and the Pharisees in the Gospels was over the “tradition of the elders.” Jesus, in that controversy, set the tradition of the elders against Scripture in such a way that he accused the Pharisees of *rejecting* the commandments of God in order to keep their own tradition. Note carefully, though these passages are often misquoted as referring to “traditions,” Jesus actually spoke to the Pharisees of the “tradition” of the elders in singular form, not plural (see Matthew 15:2, 7; Mark 7:3, 5, 8, 9, 13). It was not that this or that tradition was a bad idea nominalistically. It was the very existence of such a body of tradition that Jesus regarded as violating God’s Word.

In the genuine Judaism of Jesus, the Scripture was the *only standard* one must know in order to know the doctrines (*didaskalia*) concerning what he must or must not do or believe. In the ersatz Judaism of Rabbinic Judaism, however, an attempt was made to imbue the hermeneutics of a single faction (and a false one at that) with the authority of the fifth commandment.

The indictment the Pharisees used was a sort of multi-part syllogism as follows: “The fifth commandment requires us to honor our elders. But the teaching we have received from our elders requires that we wash our hands at certain appointed times. Your disciples have failed to wash their hands in the manner appointed by the elders and have thereby dishonored the elders. Thus we conclude that your disciples have disobeyed God in respect of the fifth commandment.” In a word, the Pharisees were not arguing simply for the practice of hand washing. Implicit in their doctrine of hand washing was the Pharisaic hermeneutic [a principle or rule of interpretation] that the elders of the church are free to formulate new doctrines or practices so long as those practices and doctrines are not contradicted by Scripture.

Jesus’ response to the Rabbis’ contention was not to speak to this or that practice. Instead, Jesus went to the very heart of their hermeneutic and exposed it as wrong. He demonstrated that their hermeneutic was so far from being an implication of the fifth commandment that it actually issued in overt violations of the fifth commandment. In genuine Judaism (the Judaism of Moses, David, and Jesus), the Word of God was permanent and inviolable – the Jews were to refrain from tampering with it either by augmentation or omission. Thus the Word of God was the authority in all matters of life and godliness (Deuteronomy 4:2).

God instructed Moses to write down the very words God dictated to him (Exodus 34:27) and that written record was the *sole basis* for the covenant God made with the nation of Israel (Exodus 24:4, 7). Of course, as God added to the canon of Scriptures, the additional books of the prophets and holy writings were added as God inspired them by His Holy Spirit. This Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura* did not first arise in 1517 or later. God established the principle with his giving of the law. No rabbinic tradition, church tradition, or “good idea” can lawfully be made coordinate with the Word of God. “Do not add to his words, lest he reprove you and you be found a liar” (Proverbs 30:6).

Jesus’ true interpretation of God’s law did not reject the Pharisaic view of washing hands because it was not a good idea to wash one’s hands when handling food. Whether a particular practice is a good idea or a bad idea was not the point. Instead, Jesus went to the more basic principle by which a doctrine or practice should be tested. He pointed out that teachings can only be pleasing to God if they meet the test of “for God commanded” (Matthew 15:4). If a doctrine does not meet that test, then it should not be called “the tradition of the elders” (Mark 7:3, 5) in order to elevate its status, but “the commandments of men” (Mark 7:7) or “the tradition of men” (Mark 7:8).

This principle of ancient Mosaic Judaism was recovered by Jesus as part of His prophetic ministry while he was physically present on earth. The elders (presbyters) today have no more authority to go beyond Scripture than the elders of the people (Exodus 19:7 cf. Matthew 21:23 et al.) had in Christ’s generation. Today, as then, everything necessary to be believed – everything that can lawfully bind the conscience – is given to us in Scripture. Scripture is the perfect standard of spiritual truth and part of its perfection is that it is the *sole standard* of faith and doctrine. Everything that God requires us to believe for our justification and sanctification and everything necessary for the proper declaration of the glory of God in the world is revealed infallibly in Scripture.

Dr. Richard Bacon, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Rowlett, TX

Dr. Edwin P. Elliott, Jr., Pastor, Reformed Presbyterian Church, Manassas, VA