

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 Answers Tradition's Role in Interpreting Scripture

Introduction: Evangelicals are often leery of tradition in religion, perhaps due to the Roman Catholic misuse of church tradition. Evangelicals rightly appeal to the Scriptures alone as their final authority. However, we must not pretend that the last two thousand years did not happen. Jesus said it was to our advantage that He leave, for He promised to send the Holy Spirit in His place. The Spirit indwells all true believers and has worked in the lives of God's people since Jesus left. Church history is the history of the Holy Spirit's work in God's people. Today we will examine the proper role of tradition in interpreting Scripture.

Review: Based on 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2, what caused the Thessalonians to think the Day of the Lord was upon them? The church was shaken because of a spurious letter that falsely claimed to be from the apostles.

Beware: There never has been any lack of false, misleading, demonically driven doctrine designed to confuse the church. It is not like the church is a little row boat enjoying a lazy afternoon outing on Lake Placid. The better analogy is that the church is in a fierce storm on the high seas with false teaching constantly washing up on deck. We had better be ready! The traditions of the apostles can help us repel all hostile boarders.

******What were the Thessalonians commanded to do (2:13-15)?** See back to 2:1-2. They were commanded to stand firm and hold to the traditions that the apostles had passed on to them (as opposed to fake letters from frauds claiming to be the apostles), 2:15. Both verbs (stand firm and hold) are in the imperative. This has significance in light of the false words and letters that were circulating. Rather than being shaken (2:2) they were to stand firm (2:15).

1. Why did the apostles feel obligated to give thanks to God for the Thessalonians (2:13)? Compare 1:3. It was because God chose them as the firstfruits to be saved. "Ought" (2:13) is from a word that means to owe money or to be in debt. The KJV has "we are bound to give thanks".

This marks the second time Paul felt that he ought to thank God for His work in them (1:3, 2:13). These "ought to" prayers function almost as book ends. He thanked God for them the first time (1:3), then he explained the fate of those outside Christ (1:1:5-2:12), then he thanked God for them again (2:13)

2. What various words were used in 2:13-14 to describe God's dealings with them? They were 1) beloved by the Lord, 2) God chose them, 3) the Spirit sanctified them and 4) they had been called.

3. What amazing contrast is there between 2:11-12 and 2:13-14? God sends some people a strong delusion, believing a lie and resulting in condemnation. God chooses others so that they will believe the truth and be saved.

Observe: The Bible clearly teaches that God chooses certain people in order to be saved.

ESV **John 15:16** You did not choose me, but I chose you . . .

4. Why might Paul have chosen this particular time to glory in the fact they had been predestined (2:13-14)? *Compare 1:5, 2:1-2, 11-12.* The church was being afflicted by unbelievers and suffering the effects of psychological warfare due to false teachings and counterfeit letters. They probably needed to be reassured of God's sovereignty in bringing them to faith.

5. In what sense were the Thessalonians the firstfruits (2:13)? In the Old Testament, worshippers offered the first fruits of their harvest as a sacrifice. The Thessalonians were the first people in the city to believe the Gospel. They were also among the first Gentiles who believed.

Note: Some manuscripts have "from the beginning" instead of firstfruits and so reads the KJV, NAS and NIV. This is because of only one letter difference in the Greek words (Shogren, p. 302).

6. Based on 2:13, what two things go along with being saved? Closely associated with being saved is sanctification and belief in the truth.

7. What is sanctification (2:13)? Sanctification is a Latin rooted word and means "holification" (I made that word up). It is the idea of being consecrated or purified or holified (I made that one up, too). Notice the unbreakable link between being chosen to be saved and being sanctified. It is a package deal.

Verse 14 begins with, "to this he called you"; to what does "this" refer (2:14)? It refers back to all of 2:13 (God chose then to be saved, sanctified and to believe). **Note:** "This" is a neuter pronoun that would normally refer the reader back to a neuter antecedent, but no such neuter singular noun is to be found. Thus it refers back to a general concept rather than a particular word (Shogren, p. 303). This construction is also found in Ephesians 2:8.

8. Paul declared that they had been called (2:14). What is God's calling? Theologians distinguish between God's general call for all to believe (an open invitation) and God's effective call to the elect (like a tractor beam) that they be saved and sanctified through faith.

9. Those who are saved will also have belief in the truth (2:13). How does Paul, in 2:14, explain what truth they believed (2:13)? *Compare 2:11.* They believed the truth of the Gospel message. This is in contrast to those who believe what is false (2:11).

10. What is the Gospel message (2:14)? *See 1 Corinthians 15:1ff, Ephesians 2:8-9.* The Gospel is the good news that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and then rose from the grave in proof that His sacrifice had been pleasing to the Father. Forgiveness is available by grace through faith as a free gift.

Side Issue: What evidence for the Trinity is found in 2:13-14? The church was beloved by the Lord (Jesus), chosen by God (the Father) and sanctified by the Spirit (of Holiness).

11. Since 2:15 begins with “so then”, it could be argued that what follows is the inspired application of the doctrine of predestination. Because they were beloved, because they had been called, because they had been chosen, because they had been sanctified (2:13-14), what did Paul want them to do (2:15)? “So then”, Paul wrote, stand firm and hold to the traditions of the apostles. These are imperatives, the first ones in the book.

12. Comparing 2:15 back to 2:1-2, with respect to what were they to stand firm (2:15)? They were to stand firm and not be shaken by spirits, verbal teachings or fake letters claiming wrong things about the Day of the Lord.

13. The Thessalonians were specifically commanded to follow, to hold to, the “traditions” of the apostles, whether received by mouth or by letter (whether oral or written, 2:15). **How are traditions (2:15) different from teachings?** The regular Greek word for “teaching” is *didaké* (basis for “didactic”), and means something that is taught, a precept or doctrine. For example:

NAS **Acts 2:42** . . . they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching (*didaché*) . . .

However, *didaké* is not the word used here in 2 Thessalonians 2:15. Instead, *paradosis* is used. It means tradition. In English, a tradition is usually thought of as a custom or way of doing things that is handed down. Webster's defines tradition as an inherited pattern of **1)** thought or **2)** action. The Greek word for tradition, *paradosis*, means “that which is handed down” be it **1)** information or **2)** custom (BAGD, p. 615).

It is quite possible to have a tradition of a certain teaching that is handed down. For example, *paradosis* was a technical term in Judaism for oral transmission of religious instruction. Here in our text it most certainly refers to Paul's oral teaching regarding the Day of the Lord.

14. What role should apostolic tradition (2:15) play in the interpretation of Scripture? The early church not only had various letters from the apostles, but also a living memory of their teachings given by word of mouth. Imagine a new person coming into a church after Paul left, reading one of Paul's letters and then exclaiming, “Oh, it looks to me like Jesus is not God”. The church could quickly and with authority correct this new person's misinterpretation because they heard Paul teach in person that Jesus is indeed God in human form.

The earliest church preferred the oral tradition of the apostles that personally relayed their teachings to any written records. Maurice Wiles called it “a continuous chain of remembered teaching which could be traced back to ‘the commandments given by the Lord . . .’” It was not until the end of the second century that the writings of the apostles began to take the primary and decisive role in the development of doctrine, and the force of oral tradition finally declined (Barnard, p. 8).

The Rule of Faith: The Bible means what the apostles said it meant. The early church had a living memory of the apostles' oral teachings. Tertullian called it the “rule of faith.” Irenaeus called it the “canon of truth”. They had a teaching legacy that could be traced directly back to the apostles. The tradition of the apostles and the divinely inspired Scriptures together constituted their authority. When heretics began to distort the Bible's teachings, the church found it necessary to draw up the ecumenical creeds (creed is from *creedo* and simply means “I believe”), such as the Apostles'

Creed and the Nicene Creed. A fifth century monk named Vincent of Lerins (two islands in the Mediterranean) put it this way, “what everywhere, always, by everybody has been believed is true catholic doctrine (Barnard, p11-14). Heretics are those who stand outside the stream of apostolic tradition.

Example: The Bible did not magically fall from the sky. It was handed to us by the church of history.

Did you know there is a man made, non inspired creed in every Bible? It is called the Table of Contents.

When were the letters of the New Testament finally compiled into one book? It was round A.D. 397 at the Council of Carthage.

How can we trust the church’s judgment for what Books belong in the bible (the TOC is a credal statement) and not accept the church’s essential theology?

Sola Scriptura: When Martin Luther, father of the Protestant Reformation, made his famous appeal to Scripture and our highest and only inspired authority, he did not reject the Rule of Faith (also known as the *regula fide*). Luther saw the Rule of Faith as a secondary authority to Scripture that helped him interpret Scripture. Luther objected to the Pope declaring that the Bible meant what the Pope said it meant. No, said Luther, it means what it has always meant, as found in the Rule of Faith.

Charles Hodge put it this way: “If the Scriptures be a plain book, and the Spirit performs the functions of a teacher to all the children of God, it follows inevitably that they must agree in all essential matters in their interpretation of the Bible. And from that fact it follows that for an individual Christian to dissent from the faith of the universal Church (i.e. the body of true believers), is tantamount to dissenting from the Scriptures themselves.” (Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*).

Solo Scriptura: A huge problem is that some have twisted Luther’s *sola scriptura* into *solo scriptura* (just me and my Bible). They read the Bible in isolation, ignoring the Rule of Faith, cut off from the historic community of faith and decide that it means what they think it means. This is no different from what the Pope did; they have merely replaced one Pope for another (the individual reader). This is a recipe for spiritual disaster. (Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*).

How likely is it that someone is going to see a new truth in the bible that the Holy Spirit failed to reveal for 2,000 years?

Or that the whole church has been wrong about something for 2,000 years and someone just now discovered that error?

Michael Horton: “Nobody goes to the Bible alone, but carries with him . . . a host of influences. It is infinitely easier to distort the Word of God when we cut ourselves off from the consensus of other Christians across time and place.” (Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*).

Keith Mathison: “A creedless church, like a creedless Christian, is a ship tossed to and fro, carried about by every wind of doctrine, compelled to consider every contradictory theological fad and novelty that comes along as long as the one proclaiming it assures his audience that it is simply what the Bible teaches.” (Mathison, p 342)

Smoke Detector: Every heretic in Christendom is ready to declare his simple allegiance to the Bible, and he’ll do it as loudly and as frequently as the most orthodox Christian. The early ecumenical creeds help us to define and detect heresy. The creeds are like smoke detectors; they’ll help sniff out heresy.

If you really believe that the Spirit has been active in the church for the past 2,000 years, then we need to align ourselves in heart and mind with the church of history and the church universal.

15. What are we to make of the fact that the word traditions is in the plural (2:15)? Compare 3:6 and 1 Corinthians 11:3. Paul clearly had more in view than merely his one teaching tradition about the Day of the Lord. Later, in 3:6-10, *paradosis* was used with reference to life-style issues. This imperative to stand firm and hold applies to all their traditions, not just their teaching traditions but also traditions for practice.

A tradition of working to supply one’s own needs was mentioned in 3:6. Another example of a tradition is the observance of the Lord’s Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11:23 the verb form of *paradosis* is used:

NIV 1 Corinthians 11:23 I received from the Lord what I also passed on (*paradidomi*) to you . . .

Church Traditions: We would argue that the church should take all apostolic traditions seriously, including their traditions for church practice.

ESV 1 Corinthians 11:3 Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions (*paradosis*) even as I delivered them to you.

Church Practice Traditions: Meeting for church on the Lord’s Day, baptizing believers only, the separation of church and state, participatory worship, a plurality of elders who lead by building congregational consensus, celebrating the Lord’s Supper weekly, celebrating the Lord’s Supper as an actual fellowship meal and relatively small congregations (Roman atrium sized churches).

******What prayer for the church did Paul offer (2:16-17)?** Paul prayed for the church to be divinely comforted and established in every good word and work.

16. Since God predestined the Thessalonians to be saved (2:13-14), what purpose did Paul’s prayer serve (2:16-17)? Gary Shogren points out that the doctrine of election, far from making prayer moot, makes it a vital component in the saints’ perseverance. God works mightily through

the prayers of his people. Paul clearly believed that his prayer for them played an integral role in their perseverance in the faith.

So What?

17. What can we learn about salvation from 2:13-14?

18. What inspired “so then” (2:15) is there to the doctrine of election (2:13-14)?

19. What can we learn from 2:15 about the role of tradition in biblical interpretation?

**** = ask this question before reading the text aloud. This is put people’s minds in gear, giving them something to look for as the text is read. It causes focus.

- These lessons are designed for a 45 minute session and are based on the ESV.
- You can hear a recording of this actual lesson being taught at www.SermonAudio.Com/NTRF

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