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TRUTH OR TRADITION

How many sincere Christians today are willing to come to the Scriptures with recognition of our cultural prejudices and with a willingness to have them challenged and changed? Most Christians today, if they come to the Scriptures at all, come with the proud presupposition that all our inherited beliefs and practices which we have heard from the pulpit or the TV are correct, then we will find in the Bible only what we want to find, that is the comfortable confirmation of the status quo. Let us admit that in the modern church many Christians never come to the Scriptures at all, much less to be challenged and changed. As a fellow minister wrote “take my name off your mailing list of *The Living Waters Newsletter* because I don’t like where you are going.” John Stott in *Authentic Christianity* wrote: “It is only when we are brave and humble enough to allow the Spirit of God through the word of God radically to call in question our most cherished opinions, that we are likely to find fresh unity through fresh understanding.”

Who gives anyone the right to question the sacred and hallowed beliefs of the sincere Christian? Does anyone know what the church believes and practices is really right or wrong? Who has the right to challenge another Christian for his sincere belief for which his parents and grandparents and his loyal pastor have instilled in him from his youth up? The Apostle Paul faced these questions when he confronted very honest and sincere belief of the religious system of his day. His conclusion was simple: “Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar” (Rom. 3:4). Jesus had earlier faced the same questions from the Jewish elite and his answer was: “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips but their heart is far from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’ Neglecting the commandment of God you hold to the tradition of men...you nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition” (Mark 7:6-8). Notice Jesus says “you hold the tradition of men”. All tradition is not bad. The Greek word for tradition means “a handing down”. The word is used to refer to Apostolic teaching: I Corinthians 11:2: “hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.” In II Thessalonians 2:15 the Apostles tells them to “hold to the traditions which you were taught” and in chapter 3:6 he speaks of “the traditions which you received of me.” It is the “traditions of men” that Jesus warns against. Paul shows how deadly these traditions can be when he warned the Colossians to “see that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ: (Col. 2:8).

There are many points at which the problem between tradition and the truth expresses itself. There is one particular area that must have the attention of every honest Christian. It has to do with the relationship between the Scriptures and the Church. The important question today is: What is the church’s attitude toward the Word of God? Modern man no longer is ready to listen to the voice of the one living and eternal God, but prefers rather the changing sands of human opinion, modernity and tradition for the foundation upon which to build his Christian life. The tragedy the church is facing today which is seldom seen or recognized, is that in hundreds of our pulpits there is a determined avoidance of the truths of the Scriptures. On Sunday after Sunday there are preachers that stand up before eternal beings, without a shred of divine truth, nothing relating to the Divine revelation in Scripture and nothing concerning the great and transforming truths revealed in the Word of God. One wonders what these men were taught in the Bible Colleges and Seminaries. The Apostle Paul stated “Woe is me if I preach not the gospel” (I Cor. 9:16). He said this because “it is the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16), and it is called “the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:5, 14). Jesus defines truth in these words as he prays to the father: “Thy word is truth” (John 17: 17). He said he was the truth (John 14:6), and if men believed in Him they would come to know the truth and the truth would make them free (John 8:32). For the most part truth has been abandoned because the Word has so small a part to play in the church’s worship and in the minister’s preaching. Wilber M. Smith in his classic work on apologetics *Therefore Stand* which was published in 1945 has the following statement concerning preaching which is as relevant today as it was when he wrote it. “What I am now going to say will probably shock many people; it is so contrary to everything that is being expressed in this age of an anemic toleration of every conceivable kind of heresy, in this age when people are so glibly advocating a spineless universal religion, and fearful of offending anyone by our own religious convictions. Let me put it frankly, in one brief sentence: what we need today is some downright, manly, courageous intolerance in the church, of all those tendencies and humanistically-derived theories which, while they may encourage the pride of man, are wholly destructive of anything bearing a resemblance to New Testament Christianity.” When we consider the path the church has taken today in the massive building programs, the expenditure of resources, programs and religious activities, we wonder if all this is commensurate with what we have really accomplished for God. The Satanic powers of paganism, sensuality, the flesh and idolatry were not peculiar only to the early church, but despite all the deceivable forms the power of evil is used today to disguise them, they are alive and active today. God could easily dispose of all these evil powers which are aligned against the church, but he has given that task to man and through the centuries man was not capable of dealing with them. God had prophesied that it would be “the seed of the woman” that would bruise the head of Satan (Gen. 3:15), and this prophesy was not fulfilled until the word became flesh and dwelt among us. It was Christ who defeated the power of Satan (I John 3:8; Heb. 2:14) and fulfilled the Genesis prophesy. In so doing he “in himself created one new man” (Eph. 2:15), that is the church to which God “has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (II Cor 5:19,20). The church has taken the place of Christ in the world and instead of him being here physically he is here in Spirit and the church is the physical representative of Christ.

MAGIC AND FAITH

There is not much thought given to magic in the church today. However it is dealt with many times in the Old Testament and is seen as a problem in the New Testament, especially in the book of Acts. Witchcraft is mentioned five times in the Old Testament and sorcery twelve times. Sorcery is mentioned five times in the New Testament and Divination twenty times in the Old Testament and one time in the new. Magi or magician is used three times in the New Testament referring to their visit to the baby Jesus (translated “wise men” in KJV) and once in Acts 13 referring to Elymas. A word very similar to the word “magi” with the same meaning is used by Paul in II Timothy 3:13 trans-lated “imposters”. Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* states: “This word in the strict sense is ‘magician’ and is used for a ‘false magician’. The only distinction between *magos* (Magi) and *goas* (imposter) is that the latter is mostly used for the lower practitioner”. Writer Nathaniel Schiffman in his book *Abacadabra* asks the question: “How does a magician stand up there on stage and fool an entire audience? How can one person deceive a whole room full of people?” A more important question is “How does a preacher stand up behind the pulpit and fool a whole church full of people?” Or “How does one person or one group of people deceive religious people for generations to come?” The answer is Satan has always used deception (magic) to influence people, and has always had imposters (magicians) to do his deceiving work.

One may unconsciously practice magic in the Lord’s work without knowing it. Moses is an example of this in Numbers 20:8-13 where the Lord told Moses: “‘Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation drink’...then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank.” Moses’ ritual act of striking the rock was a magical act. God’s word was not sufficient; he added a ritual of his own to the word of God. Magic is a religion that substitutes ritual for faith. Moses acted as a magician and added the rod to the word. He took full credit for the act when he said “Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?” as if he had the power to do it (ver. 10). Adding to the word of God is practicing magic.

Galatians 3:1: “You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?” Witchcraft: “the use of sorcery or magic” (Webster). Galatians 5:20 warns against sorcery as a work of the flesh. The problem of the Galatians was they were influenced to turn back into the legalism of the law. Rousas Rushdoony in *The Institutes Of Biblical Law* states: “Legalism is a blood relative of magic, since the magician also seeks to manipulate reality by means of rigid incantations compelling the secret powers to perform in accord with the prescribed formulas. Legalism must assume the validity of moralism, and both are essentially humanistic: the salvation of man is accomplished by the deeds of man.”

Magic is a special tool of Satan, typically shown in the book of Acts, generally when the gospel was being carried into some new unevangelized region. In Samaria (Acts 8) it was SIMON THE SORCERER (the word is magi), in Cyprus (Acts 13) it was ELYMAS, in Macedonia, (Acts 16) it was A DEMON POSSESSED GIRL, in Ephesus (Acts 19) it was THE SEVEN SONS OF SCEVA, Jewish exorcists.

ACTS 8:9-11;18,19: RIGHTEOUSNESS DOES NOT CALL ATTENTION TO ITSELF: “Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; and they all, from the least to the greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, ‘This man is what is called the Great Power of God’. And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts...Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles hands, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’” If he could lay his hands on people and impart he Holy Spirit this would further draw attention to him. In many churches it is the preacher, not Christ Jesus, that is the center of attention.

ACTS 13:6-7: RIGHTEOUSNESS CANNOT BE SEPERATED FROM FAITH: “A Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus...this man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for so his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.” Paul confronts him and says: “you are full of deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the ways of the Lord?” (ver. 10). Note he is first called a “false prophet” then a “magician”. Magicians (false prophets) are an enemy of the faith.

ACTS 16:16-18: RIGHTEOUSNESS CANNOT BE A WAY TO PERSONAL GAIN: “It happened as we were going to the place of payer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. Follow- ing after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, ‘These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation.’ She continued doing this for many days. But Paul turned and said to the spirit, ‘I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!’ And it came out at that very moment. But when her master’s saw the hope of profit was gone, they dragged them before the authorities.” What the divining girl was saying was the truth, but truth can be used in the wrong way...right words but the wrong source. In this case the truth was being used for profit. The Apostle later said “we are not like many, peddling the word of God...” (II Cor. 2:17). The “God wants you rich” TV preachers should listen to this Scripture. Even Satan sometimes tells the truth and can quote Scripture. We see this illustrated in the temptations of Jesus.

ACTS 19:13-19: RIGHTEOUSNESS CANNOT BE IMITATED "Jewish exorcists attempted to name over those who had evil spirits saying 'I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches.' The evil spirit answered and said 'I recognize Jesus, and I know Paul but who are you?' And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded." Second hand faith will not work. Much preaching today is based not upon what the Bible actually says, but upon what the preacher has been taught in seminaries which have discarded the Scriptures and substituted up-to-date rationalism.