

Rule of Faith (Tradition and the Scriptures)

by Mike Patrick

Martignoni's position on the rule of faith regarding the roles of both Scripture and tradition is pretty clear. When asked why Protestants believe that the Bible is the only source we should turn to for our rule of faith, while Catholics believe that tradition should also be considered to arrive at what is true, Martignoni explains that Catholics have what he calls the "entire Word of God." He states:

"The Catholic Church has as its sole rule of faith the entire Word of God, as it is found in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition."

He implies that it's somehow better to have two sources, tradition and the Bible to turn to when looking for the truth of God, and that non-Catholics simply don't have everything they need to have a full and fruitful relationship with God. He claims that non-Catholics don't have what is called "the fullness of the faith." What he's saying is that everyone else is missing something, but the Catholic Church has it all. That's been the position of the Catholic Church for centuries.

The truth is that it's not always the case that because we have more of something, we're somehow better off for it. Is it true that because certain people may have more money than you or I do they're necessarily better off because of it? Is it true that my friend's life is better than mine because he has three more houses than I do? No. In fact, it may be the case that he's worse off. What if my friend with more money begins to depend on it, love it, and chase after it with insatiable greed? Is he still better off because he has more money than I do? The obvious answer is no, and yet we see Martignoni imply that the Catholic Church has some sort of theological and spiritual advantage because it looks to tradition in addition to the Bible for its truth.

I often hear John Martignoni make the comment that the Catholic Church is the one true church because it's the "oldest" church so it has "more" history behind it. Apparently because he believes it can trace its history back all the way to Christ, John Martignoni feels his faith is actually real, while mine can't be, because it's not "old" enough. He's alluded to this many times in his talks and writings. But if we use Martignoni's reasoning to determine what's truly important, then he should seriously consider becoming a Jew. After all, Judaism is much older than Christianity itself, let alone the Catholic Church. Better yet, he should be a pagan, since paganism predates Judaism as a faith system, and it has "more" history behind it. The truth is that it's not how much of something we have that matters, or how old it is that matters, but it's *what* we have, and very often what we reject, that counts. This is especially true when considering the truth claims of God. It becomes important to find out what the right thing is; not how

much “older,” or “bigger,” or shinier it is.

The best place to turn for answers and truth is the Bible alone, because the Bible is an objective, “self-authenticating” collection of sixty-six books that together comprise the complete Word of God. Tradition typically is not involved, nor does it need to be. At best it might be an add on that enhances, but it should never trump the Bible. The Bible demonstrates its supernatural characteristics through Manuscript evidence, archaeological evidence, predictive prophecy, and statistical evidences that validate its claims of truth over and over again. No other writing (including the Catholic Catechism) demonstrates such authority, and such power. Tradition is just tradition, and there’s often no real way to validate it as truth. There’s usually no reliable way to tell how its changed over the years if it has in fact changed, and there’s often no objective standard available to tell if the tradition itself was ever valid enough to base our faith in it to begin with. Many people just “believe” that their traditions are giving them something sacred, because they’ve come to depend on the Catholic Church for their source of truth. They’re, told to believe in Catholic tradition, because that’s what Catholics do.

If were’ looking for truth in tradition, the first thing to do is to turn to Scripture to see what it says regarding the question at hand, since the Holy Scriptures have independently proven themselves over the centuries to be dependable, and since God Himself directs us to turn to Scripture for truth (2 Tim 3.) We should find complete agreement between the Scriptures and the tradition, if it’s in fact true that Scripture and tradition together comprise the entire Word of God. Even if you don’t believe that the Bible alone is all we need to arrive at truth, most Christians won’t deny that the Bible is at least a good place to start looking. We know this because we see Paul commending the Bereans in Acts 17 for doing just that. The Bereans measured what Paul was preaching against the Scriptures themselves to see if what he was saying was true. Their actions, plus Paul’s confirmation that their practice was good, gives us a solid standard to go by when seeking the right way to go about finding God’s truth. We see at least two points here: first, the Bereans valued truth, and they valued the Scriptures. We don’t see them measuring Paul’s teaching against tradition at all, but against the written Word of God alone, which was their standard for truth - just as Jesus did with the Pharisees. It’s important to remember that tradition never “trumps” the Bible, nor does it rise to an equal level of authority. Traditions (at least those that are spiritually valid) must have their beginning in the Scriptures if they’re to be taken as having any spiritual weight at all. If they don’t, agree with the Scriptures, then what faith purpose do they serve? They’re just man made constructs set within a theological context, and may even be the “different gospel” that Paul warns against in the book of Galatiansⁱⁱ.

John Martignoni desperately wants us to believe that the Bible alone is not adequate as a source of truth, and also that even if it were, you and I as individuals are not capable of understanding it apart from the Magisterial teachings of the Catholic Church. He believes and teaches this because he's compelled by his Church to do so, in spite of what the Bible says. The Bible reveals Jesus' words, in the book of Matthew 11:25:

"I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children."

We then see Paul in writing to the Church at Corinth state:

"When I came to you brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power."

(1Corinthians 2:1-5.)

We don't see a "priestly" man in Paul. We don't see flowing robes, burning incense, and fancy fanfare. We see a humble man, depending on the power of the Holy Spirit to impart truth.

Even so, the Catholic Church claims that we're not able to understand the Bible and interpret it privately.

(From the Catholic Encyclopedia) *"By pinning private judgment on the Bible the Reformers started a book religion, i.e. a religion of which, theoretically, the law of faith and conduct is contained in a written document without method, without authority, without an authorized interpreter. The collection of books called "the Bible" is not a methodical code of faith and morals; if it be separated from the stream of tradition which asserts its Divine inspiration, it has no special authority, and, in the hands of private interpreters, its meaning is easily twisted to suit every private mind."*

The quote above is contrary to Paul's teaching that it's the power of the Holy Spirit that imparts truth. While some people might minimize the Scriptures and their importance, it's assumed by most Christians, as well as many Catholics, that the Bible is a dependable source of information. Martignoni points out several Scriptures to make his point on holding to the traditions of the Catholic Church. He quotes the following passages, and then comments on each.

“So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.” 2 Thes. 2:15 (Martignoni then writes: *“Traditions! Traditions taught by word of mouth, in other words, oral tradition, and traditions taught by letter...”*)

He goes on to quote 1 Cor. 11:2 where Paul commends the Corinthians for holding to the traditions he taught them. He quotes 2 Tim. 2:2 where we see Paul directing that tradition should be taught, and he quotes 1 Thes. 2:13 where the church is commended because they received the Word of God that they had heard. However, in all of these cases, the traditions that had been taught up until then were the traditions to be held to - not traditions that were thought up later - some even thousands of years later. Martignoni's references here are invalid because we aren't comparing apples to apples. Paul and the apostles taught those traditions Paul refers to, but because Martignoni's preconceived world view assumes that the Popes and Bishops down through ages are authoritative, and have been given the commission to teach down through the centuries, he assumes the modern Catholic traditions that have formed subsequent to the traditions Paul was referring to are equally valid. There is no warrant for this view.

It has been argued that the Catholic Church has “invented” many traditions that Catholics observe today. Martignoni's belief that the Catholic Church is correct in all of its teachings is clouding his better judgment and skewing his apologetic. Rather than take an objective view first and then arrive at the Catholic truth, Martignoni starts at the Catholic teaching of tradition, and works his way back, trying all the while to fit the pieces of Catholic teaching together with the teachings of the Bible. The problem is they don't always fit together well at all, and we can't assume that some of the modern Catholic traditions have anything at all to do with Paul's reference to the traditions that had been taught by him and the other Apostles. Martignoni is using assumptive language to get his point across, and this is bad apologetics.

Paul couldn't have been speaking about many of today's Catholic traditions, because he didn't know what those were; they hadn't been instituted yet. In addition, we can see Martignoni's belief in apostolic succession clouding his thinking. I'm not arguing against apostolic succession here, that's best left for another day. What I'm saying is that, from a valid apologetic perspective, Martignoni assumes much in order to arrive at his conclusions. In fact, he assumes so much that his argument really becomes just his opinion, and is not a dependable, objective Christian apologetic. His teaching on Catholic tradition is more of what he wants you to believe because he believes it, than actual truth.

Is that the end of the story? Is being told to heed tradition and follow the traditions they (the apostles) had been told to hold to because the Catholic Church says to do so the same thing as living by the Scriptures? Is it really true that the traditions we have today are as dependable as the Bible? Is it true that if

the Church fathers, and Catholics through the ages followed certain traditions that in every case we should feel comfortable in doing so today? Not according to Jesus.

Jesus made several statements as to how we're to view the roles of both Scripture and tradition. We see Him making it perfectly clear in Matthew 15: 1-6:

"Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem, saying, "Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." And He answered and said to them, "And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? "For God said, Honor your father and mother,' and, He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death.' "But you say, Whoever shall say to his father or mother, "Anything of mine you might have been helped by has been given to God," he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And thus you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition."

Jesus makes it clear that while tradition may be good, it never usurps the Word of God, and in some cases can do violence to it. In all cases, the Bible is to be the ultimate, final, and therefore the sole rule of faith. Tradition is never shown to be on par with the Scriptures in the Bible, it's always subordinate to them. In some cases tradition can work against the follower of God. We see in Mark 7:7-9 the following:

"They worship Me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men. You have to let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."ⁱⁱⁱ

Again we see Jesus clarifying how he sees the Word of God and how it stacks up against tradition as He admonishes us to nurture Scripture, even if it means putting away tradition, and hardened world views. Clearly we see Jesus minimizing the role of tradition, and clearly, any tradition that was created by the church authorities was subject to the Word of God. It's simply not the case (as Martignoni suggests) that the Scriptures and tradition comprise the whole word of God. The Bible comprises the whole word of God. It's also clear that all people are free moral agents, and are capable of making mistakes. This has been proven throughout history, and was shown to be true of the Apostles as well.

Things become cloudy with Martignoni at this point, because he claims that the traditions he's speaking about are apostolic traditions, and come from the Apostles themselves out of a position of authority. The Catholic Church says that if the teachings on tradition come from authority, then they're fine. What we see from Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees however is not an issue of authority, but an issue of disagreement between the way the Pharisees viewed tradition, and how Jesus viewed tradition – and they were the authorities! Jesus spelled out how He feels about tradition, and He didn't really care about their authority.

He didn't care about the self declared righteousness of the Pharisees, namely that they knew the truth because they were the one "truth faith." Personally, I'd be worried if my Church didn't see it Jesus' way, but insisted that it knew better.

We also see elsewhere in the Scriptures Paul rebuking Peter because Peter was teaching inappropriately and not walking a straight path in line with the truth of the gospel. Again, Peter was to follow scripture, not his ideas, or tradition (Gal 2:11-21). People were getting the wrong ideas from Peter because he was giving incorrect information, information that could have eventually turned to tradition - just as it had with the Pharisees.

At this point I want to sidetrack a bit, and comment on the doctrine of Sola Scriptura. The doctrine of Sola Scriptura is the doctrine that the Bible, as God's written word, is "self-authenticating and clear. It's understandable. It holds that one can use Scripture to interpret Scripture. We can use the Bible itself to validate the position that tradition is not to be taken on par with the Bible. We see in several Scriptures, Jesus favoring the Bible over tradition, and rebuking the Pharisees because they invalidated the Word of God with their tradition. We also see Paul rebuking Peter because he was teaching wrongly, which shows us that it's possible for traditions to develop that are incorrect- even from the apostles! If the apostles themselves had incidents of teaching incorrectly, how much faith are we to have now in what the Catholic Church claims is their "successors?"

Paul advocates tradition as a valid learning tool, and then Jesus warns against tradition, and that it can be harmful if it nullifies the Word of God. Paul rebukes Peter for teaching, by mouth, wrongly. There you have it – Scripture clarifying itself. We don't need Martignoni to tell us that tradition and Scripture comprise, as he puts it, the "entire Word of God", because tradition may or may not comprise any of the teaching of Scripture depending on what it is, as Jesus warns above. It's obvious that the Bible contains the Word of God, but it's not always obvious that tradition does. By using certain techniques stemming from the idea of Sola Scriptura, we get a clearer understanding of how tradition fits in to the truth of God's Word.

So what are we to come away with here? It's clear that on one hand Martignoni tell us that the traditions of men should be followed just as earnestly as the directives of Scripture are to be followed – if not more so, because the Catholic Church has "The entire Word of God" as Martignoni puts it. We need to understand that here, as with a lot of Martignoni's teachings, we find a smattering of truth. It's true that the Bible sometimes supports tradition, but it's also true that the Bible tells us how to deal with tradition in light of the Scriptures, how to put it in perspective, and how to keep it in check.

The second Vatican Council gave three criteria for Scriptural interpretation:^{iv}

- 1: Pay close attention to the whole of Scripture (its content and unity.)
- 2: Read the Scripture within the living Tradition of the Church.
- 3: Be attentive to the analogy of faith.

It would appear that point 2 is what's giving (or should be giving) John heartburn. What the Council appears to be saying is that it's okay to read the Scriptures, as long as you understand them the way the Church does. This becomes a problem for obvious reasons. We see how it became an issue in the Scriptures themselves. The Pharisees are telling Jesus in Matthew that He has a problem because He doesn't see tradition as they see it. He's not putting the stock into it that they do. He then tells them that it is they that have the problem—not Him. At this point Martignoni might be saying that yes, but we're talking about the church Jesus instituted, and it can't be wrong. However, this would not be a good argument, because Jesus then goes on to tell the Pharisees that it's precisely because they choose to view Scripture in light of their tradition (just as point 2 above directs all Catholics to do), instead of tradition in light of Scripture, that they have fallen into deception.

Summary

Vatican II and the Catholic Church confine John Martignoni in his understanding of Scripture being the sole rule of faith. He has no choice but to favor the Council's teaching on Scripture and how to interpret it, while he minimizes the clear teachings of Jesus in the Scriptures. This is so much the case that he states:

"In other words, the Bible clearly supports the Catholic Church's teaching that the Word of God is contained in both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition."

There is no precedent anywhere for this belief other than in the Catholic Church's own self-declaration that we ought to interpret what we read in light of what the Catholic Church tells us to believe, because it agrees with the Bible. If Martignoni is correct, why didn't Jesus agree with the Pharisees and agree with their teaching on the extreme importance of adhering to traditions when they called Him on it? Why did Jesus advise the Pharisees to look to Scripture as the sole authority – not tradition, and not to Scripture plus tradition? Why did He warn them not to nullify the Word of God with their traditions? Think of it: if John Martignoni had been standing there the day Jesus told the Pharisees they were in error following tradition over Scripture, Martignoni would have had no choice but to fall on the side of tradition and declare Jesus wrong, just as he does today by insisting that tradition is on par with the Scriptures. The truth is that tradition is

fine up, and until, it contradicts the Word of God, or even casts the slightest doubt on God's Word. It's fine until it adds to, or takes away from the Word of God. There's nothing wrong with tradition until it works to undermine or weaken the Word of God. If it seeks to do that, it's not only a danger, but also a cancer that has great potential to harm God's people.

If we keep in mind, just as Jesus did, that it's the Scriptures that everything else must adhere to, and give way to, then we'll be fine. It's simply not true that all traditions contain the truth of God. Martignoni's statement that "*The Bible clearly supports the Catholic Church's teaching that the Word of God is contained in both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition*" is not, in every case, true. It's true that tradition plays a role within the pages of the Bible and within the church, but Martignoni exploits this fact beyond valid interpretation.

Elevation of Tradition

It's been a tradition, or "practice" in the Roman Catholic Church to approach Jesus through Mary for many years. Today it's believed by virtually all Catholics that each time God is prayed to through Mary's intercession, divine grace and blessings are distributed through her mediation. There is absolutely no Biblical warrant for this belief. Catholics in the past would see this as a foreign thing to do, and would most likely think it to be strange, especially in light of the fact that the Bible states that there is no Mediator between God and man except the man, Jesus Christ^v. Not being an official doctrine of the Catholic Church, the consecration to Jesus through Mary is none the less a very real, and important part of being Catholic. In fact most Catholics would question your Catholicism if you didn't practice and believe in this tradition. This is an example of how traditions can interfere with, and even skew our perception of God and who He is, and consequently affecting our relationship with Him.

If they're not supported by Scripture, the traditions of Christians should not rise to a level on par or above the Bible, and they may negatively impact our lives, just as we saw they did with the Pharisees. The religious leaders in Jesus' day influenced many because of their perceived authority, and they insisted they knew God, largely by their dedication and devotion to tradition. Jesus told us to look to the Bible for truth and what is important, and that's what all of us as Christians should be concerned with in order to find truth, and to please God.

- ⁱ Two Minute Apologetics #13
- ⁱⁱ The Holy Bible: Galatians 1:8-9
- ⁱⁱⁱ The Holy Bible: Mark 7:7-9 NIV
- ^{iv} 2nd Vatican Council :111,112,13,114
- ^v The Holy Bible 1 Tim. 2:5