

Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee



Continue in What You Have Learned

ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL CITIES in Asia Minor, Ephesus was an important commercial hub in the ancient world. A Jewish colony had prospered there long before St Paul preached there in the first century AD. The community he established was significant enough for him to leave his dearest spiritual son, Timothy, at its head. The two epistles which St Paul wrote to Timothy give us a glimpse into the life of this important early Church.

Expect Persecution

Reminding Timothy that “*all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution*” (v. 12), St Paul alludes to the persecutions he endured “*at Antioch, Iconium and Lystra*” (2 Tim 3:11) in his missionary journey of AD 47-49. The Roman persecution of Christians had not yet begun; Paul’s trouble came from those Jews who did not accept his teaching: “*The Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region*” (Acts 13:50). The same thing happened at Iconium, so the apostles fled to Lystra.

Acts 19 tells of Paul’s own experience in Ephesus where persecution came from another source. Ephesus was the center of an important cult to the Roman goddess Diana. There a certain silversmith, Demetrius, incited people to riot, saying that “*not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands. So not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship*” (Acts 19:26-27). Thus it was the devotees of the pagan gods who were the main opponents of St Paul and his teaching in Ephesus. The very fabric of Ephesian society was bound up with the Roman deities, especially “*Diana of the Ephesians,*” whose cult attracted numerous worshippers from the entire region.

Expect False Teachers

Church life in the first century was much more fluid than in later years. The great councils and primatial synods were not yet envisioned so there was no doctrinal authority beyond that of the local bishop. Self-proclaimed teachers often mingled aspects of the Christian Gospel with Gnostic or even pagan ideas. St Paul warned Timothy that these “*evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived*” (2 Tim 3:13).

Many historians think that St Paul’s prediction was fulfilled. Some teachers began promoting pagan practices such as ritual prostitution and use of

intoxicants in worship. They felt such behavior was justified because faith in Christ had replaced the Law as the means of salvation. And so, they reasoned, all prohibitions of the Law were no longer binding.

The problem continued throughout the century. The Book of Revelation begins with letters written by John to the seven Churches of Asia. In the letter to Ephesus, he wrote: “*I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars*” (Rev 2:2). John goes on to commend the Ephesians for combating the Nicolaitans, who some think tolerated adultery and ate foods sacrificed to idols.

The Remedy: Follow the Tradition

St Paul’s solution to the problem of the false teachers is what we would call the appeal to Apostolic Tradition. He tells Timothy to “... *continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them*” (v. 14). What Timothy would have learned came from the oral teaching of St Paul, his letters, and the apostles’ interpreting of the Old Testament, as not even the Gospels had been written at this time. Paul saw himself as passing on what he had received from others. The Greek terms for *passing on* and *receiving* are forms of the word *paradosis*, which we translate as *Tradition*.

The Church considers that the Holy Spirit dwells actively in the Church, according to Christ’s promise, and that the outward forms of Holy Tradition – both the content of Tradition and the process of passing it on – are the work of the Holy Spirit living within it.

While St Paul does not use the term Holy Tradition, we see from his writings that he considered his *doctrine* as both received and passed on (i.e. an element of Tradition): “*For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures ...*” (1 Cor 15:3).

He also saw the Church’s *practice* as elements of Tradition, both received and passed on: “*For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread... (1 Cor 11:23).*”

Thus, in telling Timothy to focus on what he has learned from the Old Testament and the apostolic preaching, Paul was instructing him to remain faithful to the elements of God-given Holy Apostolic Tradition which he had come to know.

In the centuries that followed the Church came to see that Scripture and liturgy are not the only elements of Holy Tradition. The fruit of the Spirit’s

presence in the Church also includes writings of the Church Fathers, the Creeds and teachings of the Councils, the holy icons and the witness of the saints. Reverence for Holy Tradition is perhaps the most basic characteristic of the Eastern Churches.

On the Apostolic Tradition

“Of the dogmas and sermons preserved in the Church, certain ones we have from written instruction, and certain ones we have received from the Apostolic Tradition, handed down in secret. Both the one and the other have one and the same authority for piety, and no one who is even the least informed in the decrees of the Church will contradict this. For if we dare to overthrow the unwritten customs as if they did not have great importance, we shall thereby imperceptibly do harm to the Gospel in its most important points. And even more, we shall be left with the empty name of the Apostolic preaching without content. For example, let us especially make note of the first and commonest thing, that those who hope in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ should sign themselves with the Sign of the Cross. Who taught this in Scripture? Which Scripture instructed us that we should turn to the east in prayer? Which of the saints left us in written form the words of invocation during the transformation of the bread of the Eucharist and the Chalice of blessing? For we are not satisfied with the words which are mentioned in the Epistles or the Gospels, but both before them and after them we pronounce others also as having great authority for the Mystery, having received them from the unwritten teaching. By what Scripture, likewise, do we bless the water of Baptism and the oil of anointing and, indeed, the one being baptized himself. Is this not the silent and secret tradition? And what more? What written word has taught us this anointing with oil itself? Where is the triple immersion and all the rest that has to do with Baptism, the renunciation of Satan and his angels to be found? What Scripture are these taken from? Is it not from this unpublished and unspoken teaching which our Fathers have preserved in a silence inaccessible to curiosity and scrutiny, because they were thoroughly instructed to preserve in silence the sanctity of the Mysteries? For what propriety would there be to proclaim in writing a teaching concerning that which it is not allowed for the unbaptized even to behold?”

(St Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, ch. 27).

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