

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **HOW JESUS DEALT WITH THE SAME PROBLEM OF MAN MADE TRADITIONS WHICH CONTRADICT SCRIPTURE**

*<sup>9</sup> And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition!”*

*Mark 7:9 (RSV)*

In this book we are mainly looking at ways in which today’s churches are not led, structured or organised in the same way as they were in the first century. A common response to this is to claim this is just creating a needless argument about “unimportant secondary issues” of practice and that what really matters is accurate doctrine and that we preach the true Gospel.

They contend that people like me should not rock the boat by objecting to what we see as unbiblical practices. They also argue that if Jesus was here now in bodily form He would not take issue with the way we run churches and would only concern Himself with doctrine, not practice, structure or the leadership model. However, I don’t think that is true.

I believe He would have a lot to say about how our churches have departed from the biblical model practised by the Early Church and why it matters. In support of that belief I would point to the way Jesus handled the problems that had developed over the centuries in Israel with the creation of over 3000 man made laws which were imposed on the people by the religious leaders but which were not in the Bible.

These man made laws and customs were called “*the oral law*” or “*the traditions of the elders*” and they were gradually added to the Law of Moses, like barnacles attaching themselves to the hull of a ship until it is entirely covered in them.

The Jewish religious leaders claimed that these additional rules, regulations and practices, which were not part of the written Law of Moses, had instead been handed down based on things Moses had allegedly said verbally but not written. Hence the name “*the oral law*”.

That is what they claim, but it is plainly untrue as Moses never said any of those things. Quite apart from that, it is a vital principle that when it comes to doctrine we can only ever rely on what is written, i.e. on Scripture. That is the only thing which God has guaranteed to be accurate.

The Pharisees claimed that these 3000 rules were just as important as the 613 laws within the written Law of Moses and equally binding. However, in practice, they actually ended up seeing these 3000 extra rules as being more important than the written Law of Moses. They got very upset with anyone who didn’t observe them. Indeed, they were more upset with people who didn’t observe their man made traditions than with those who disobeyed the Bible.

How then did Jesus respond to this situation? Did He turn a blind eye and ignore their false teachings so as to keep the peace and avoid controversy? On the contrary, Jesus went out of His way to contradict the traditions of the Elders and to disobey them and He did it all very publicly, not just in private.

That is the main reason why the Pharisees clashed with Him and even hated Him, because He openly contradicted their teachings and practices. They particularly hated it when He broke any of their 3000 laws in full view of the public, which He did very many times.

For the avoidance of doubt, Jesus never disobeyed any of the 613 commands set out in the written Law of Moses. He obeyed the Law of Moses perfectly at all times throughout His entire life, which nobody else had ever been able to do. So, what Jesus broke was not that, but only the oral law or traditions of the Elders which were not given by God and were all man made and therefore illegitimate and false.

Even to keep the peace Jesus was not willing to endorse their man made rules and He was not prepared to set a public precedent by obeying them. Had He done so it would have been a signal to the people that these additional man made rules were valid and came from God, and were binding on the people, which was not the case. Here is one well known example of this:

*<sup>1</sup> Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, <sup>2</sup> “Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” <sup>3</sup> He answered them, “And why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? <sup>4</sup> For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die.’ <sup>5</sup> But you say, ‘If any one tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God, he need not honor his father.’ <sup>6</sup> So, for the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God. <sup>7</sup> You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:*

*<sup>8</sup> ‘This people honors me with their lips,  
but their heart is far from me;  
<sup>9</sup> in vain do they worship me,  
teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’”*

*Matthew 15:1-9 (RSV)*

Next time you read the gospels, be on the lookout for occasions when Jesus clashed publicly with the Pharisees and take note each time of what the issue was, as there were many. In the example given above the Pharisees got very angry that Jesus’ disciples did not wash their hands before eating. When you see that you might imagine they were referring to ordinary hand washing for the purposes of hygiene, and you might wonder why Jesus refused to tell his disciples to do that.

But that was not the issue at all. They were referring to the elaborate and very formal religious hand washing rituals they engaged in whereby they washed their hands all the way up to their elbows as part of a complicated ceremony with prayers and rigmarole. This was also long and drawn out and they would need to repeat the washing ritual a number of times. The truth is they mainly did all this in order to be seen by others and to look impressive.

Jesus could easily have got into line and done whatever the Pharisees did so as to keep them happy but He wasn’t willing to. He obviously considered issues like this as worthy of taking a stand on and, if need be, falling out with people over. The same thing arose with issues like walking through or alongside a cornfield on the Sabbath. Moses had never forbidden that. He only forbade *working* on the Sabbath.

However, what the Pharisees did was to hugely enlarge the Law of Moses to make thousands of other things either required or forbidden. So, for example, they reasoned that if you were to walk through or

alongside a cornfield on the Sabbath your cloak might rub against some corn and the heads or even single grains of corn might fall off and this would amount to reaping or harvesting, which would be work.

Quite obviously, that was not Moses' intention when he wrote the Law. He did not regard that as work. This nit picking rule was one of the thousands of illegitimate additions to the Law which the religious leaders invented. Therefore, guess where Jesus led the disciples when they were out walking on a Sabbath – straight across a cornfield, with the Pharisees watching closely and gnashing their teeth in anger.

However, as bad as the situation was during Jesus' earthly ministry in terms of the illegitimate extensions made to the Law of Moses, I would say the situation we face today in the churches is even more serious. I believe therefore that if Jesus was to walk into a church today, or if any of the apostles were to do so, they would be even more alarmed and concerned than Jesus was about the man made "traditions of the Elders".

Taking an extreme example, imagine apostle Paul walking into a Roman Catholic church today. At his first glance he would probably assume it to be a pagan temple, especially as he looked at the statue of Mary which is identical to the statues of the goddess Semiramis whom pagans worshipped in their temples all over the Empire. She was the original "Queen of Heaven", whose title the Catholic church transferred to Mary.

The worship of Mary is based entirely on that, and the title "Queen of Heaven" comes solely from paganism and is never given to Mary anywhere in the Bible. Indeed, the practice of worshipping this false goddess is condemned in the Bible long before Mary was even born. Those who worshipped Semiramis used to bake cakes for her. This evil practice is what Jeremiah is referring to in this passage:

***<sup>18</sup> The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger.***

***Jeremiah 7:18 (RSV)***

The pagans simply changed the name of the statue from Semiramis to Mary. So, Paul would see the paganism of the Mary statue immediately. None of this is surprising given that the Catholic church is undeniably based upon a mixture of paganism and some elements of Christianity. They literally took over the pagan temples and used them as churches after Emperor Constantine's alleged conversion. Then in thousands of temples the statue of the goddess Semiramis was simply renamed as Mary.

That is also the real reason why the Catholic church has priests. They are not based on the model of Old Testament priests working in the Temple in Jerusalem. As you will see clearly if you carefully scour the whole New Testament letters and the book of Acts, the Early Church *did not have any priests of any kind*. The leaders were known as elders, bishops or overseers which are just three words describing the same person and they had no priestly function of any kind.

Likewise, apostle Paul would have held his head in his hands with horror at seeing things like:

- a) the mass
- b) sacraments
- c) oral confession to a priest

- d) infant baptism
- e) bishops ruling over many churches, as opposed to one house church being served by several bishops as the Early Church did
- f) purgatory
- g) worship of Mary
- h) praying to “saints”
- i) praying the rosary with endless repetition and mindless words
- j) limbo
- k) indulgences, whereby you give money to the church to purchase a reduction of your time in purgatory
- l) dictatorial, hierarchical leadership or “haughty prelates” as John Wycliffe called the Catholic bishops who opposed him
- m) celibate priests
- n) nuns who are likewise celibate
- o) praying in front of statues and relics

And the list goes on and on of things the Catholic church does which are not in the Bible and which were not done by the Early Church. There is also a long list of things which are in the Bible but which they do not do or believe. You might brush this aside, however, as having no relevance to you on the basis that you are not part of the Roman Catholic church because you are an Anglican, or a Methodist, or a Baptist, or Pentecostal, or part of a reformed Calvinist or Lutheran church.

But think again, because all of these various denominations, although they differ from Roman Catholic churches, retain many of the man made unbiblical practices which the Roman Catholic church invented. So, although the reformers threw out a lot of false doctrines and false practices in the Reformation, they didn’t get rid of all of it, to put it mildly.

Therefore, while a Calvinist or an Anglican or indeed any of these denominations might imagine they have eliminated all the falsehoods of Catholicism, I can testify that they haven’t. And I feel more qualified than most to recognise the similarities because I was raised as a Catholic and didn’t finally leave it until I was 21.

Consequently, I can recognise the influences of Catholicism in all these churches, even though their own members assume that has all been removed. But if we put doctrines to one side, the main similarity is in terms of the hierarchical structure which they all have, the method and style of leadership, and the structure of each local church.

So, for example, every church I was ever involved in before I started a house church had the following features, all of which are taken straight from the Roman Catholic model:

- a) a special building which creates a financial burden for the congregation
- b) a leader or group of leaders who are paid by the church, thereby creating yet another financial burden which did not exist in the Early Church

- c) the church is part of a denomination which means the wider national organisation governs or at least influences what that church does rather than each congregation making all its own decisions
- d) the leaders are classified as “clergy” and are considered to be different from, and higher than, the ordinary lay members
- e) many (not all) continue to practise infant baptism
- f) the leader or leaders do almost everything and the congregation are largely passive spectators

The point is that all of these practices, which originate from Roman Catholicism rather than the Bible, are unbiblical. I believe Jesus would have objected to these things just as strongly, if not even more strongly, than He did the Traditions of the Elders about which He clashed with the Pharisees.

When I make these objections many people’s response is to argue that even if these practices are unbiblical and were unknown in the Early Church, they are “harmless”. So, they may not be what the Early Church did but it’s OK for us to have these practices because they are not inherently sinful. I agree that these things are not necessarily sinful in themselves but that is not the issue. The real questions are:

- a) does God want the churches to operate in these ways?
- b) are there any harmful consequences to operating in these ways even if such harm is not intended or foreseen?

My contention is that there are harmful consequences due to the removal of God given safeguards which the biblical model of church provides. I shall discuss these in subsequent chapters when we look at domination, manipulation and control which almost invariably arise in a traditional clergy based church structure leading to abuse of the people.