**Who Needs Theology?**

Lesson #2

-Do you see any difficulty in appealing to “the Bible alone”?

-Jehovah Witnesses’ and many of the strange and even dangerous cult groups

make the same appeal.

**-Martin Luther**’s appeal of *sola scriptura* (scripture alone), over against church tradition, had to do with the *traditionalism* in his day.

-Luther upheld the Apostle’s Creed, as well as the Creeds of Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon creeds and his works are filled with quotes by the church fathers.

-In Luther’s commentary on *Romans* he quotes Augustine on almost every page.

-Luther was trying to call the church back (*re*form) to scripture and Great tradition.

-**John Calvin**’s *Institutes* is also full of quotes by the church fathers.

-When we say we believe in the “Bible alone” we often ignore the fact that we were first taught the Bible in the church community; we didn’t read it in a vacuum.

-The Reformers and Church Fathers taught catechism to children and those inquiring about Christianity. (Creed, Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer).

-The development of the ancient creeds also coincided with the canonization of the New Testament.

-We need to recognize the positive help that church teaching has given us, but also recognize how this may also cause blind spots.

-The reason for blind spots is that the community tradition we have been taught the scriptures in has often been too narrow of a community (i.e. reading from one denominational perspective, one ethnic background, one era of time, etc).

-This can cause us to have, often uninformed, views on Biblical doctrines.

-For this reason the study of scripture in light of the Great Tradition is our safest guide.

-The Great Tradition is the general consensus of the church in the first 400-500 years of her existence as reflected in the canonization of the New Testament books/letters and the creeds of the early church (i.e. Apostle’s, Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon, canonization of the New Testament).

\*The Great Tradition acts as guardrails in our study of the scripture to help us stay on the road and determine what matters most.

\*Another analogy of the Great Tradition could be a map or compass.

-Protestants have rightly appealed to the Bible as our authority in matters of faith and practice, but we all know that the Bible must be interpreted.

-And the Bible is not to be interpreted by what we *feel* or would like it to say, but what the consensus of the whole church understands it to say, as is seen in Great Tradition.

-The early church often appealed to three main sources and norms in arguing against heretics and their teachings and for what they considered to be correct Christian beliefs: 1. *The Hebrew prophets* (OT). 2. *The writings of the apostles* (NT). 3. *The rule of Faith* (Creed).

-The Great Tradition held the uniqueness of the person and work of Jesus as essential to all Biblical interpretation and faithful community living.

\*“Jesus Christ is Lord” was the earliest Creed.

Placed in the dogma category have been beliefs that are judged essential to confessing Jesus Christ as unsurpassable Lord and Saviour, including confessing him as God incarnate and the sacrifice for the sins of the world. (Olson, *Mosaic,* p. 46).

-This is why doctrines around Trinity, Incarnation and Resurrection really matter to the essence of Christianity, whereas doctrines around forms of baptism, speaking in tongues and the length of days in creation don’t.

Christians should know their religious heritage including the Great Tradition or consensus of basic Christian belief as well as they know their Bible. The Great Tradition is like a map or a compass. (Olson, *Mosaic* p. 37).

-But theology developed around “Jesus Christ is Lord” to explain and defend against false teachings and Biblical interpretations of these words.

-Some early heretics denied that Jesus was a real historical human, or that he had any connection to the OT, and others said that he had already returned.

-This is where the development of the early creeds came from.

**The Apostle’s Creed**

We believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth:

And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; (he descended to the dead); the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty; from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

-Even this began to be misunderstood as followers of Arius (or JW’s) could claim the Apostle’s Creed, but interpreted it in an unbiblical and unorthodox way.

-So, eventually (325 AD) **The Nicene Creed** was established:

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made;

who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father (and the Son), who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And we believe in one catholic (universal) and apostolic church;

We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins, and we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life in the world to come.

\*(Important to understand this history, especially in light of things like the *Da Vinci Code,* which some people took as serious history)*.*

\**Getting to know the Church Fathers*, Bryan Litfin.

\**Learning Theology with the Church Fathers,* Christopher Hall.

*Living Wisely with the Church Fathers,* Christopher Hall.

\*One of the best modern attempts to construct a scriptural Great Tradition Theology is Thomas Oden’s *Systematic Theology* (3 vol.)

-The Creeds summarise what the Bible teaches and also guide us in correctly interpreting the Bible.

-Our authority is not in the Creeds, but in the Bible from which the Creeds arrive, but they then, in turn, help us interpret the Bible.

-Some of this should give us a little more understanding (and sympathy) for what the Catholics mean when they say, “Scripture and Tradition”.

-Where Catholics go wrong is when they equate Scripture and Tradition with equal authority so that traditions (often later traditions) which either contradict scripture (papal infallibility) or have no bases in scripture (can’t eat meat on Fridays) are given the same weight as scripture.

\*The interpretation(s) of tradition are equal to scripture.

-Where Protestant (especially evangelicals) go wrong is when they appeal to “the Bible alone” without recognizing the need for teachers and the church (Great Tradition) to help them interpret the Bible correctly.

\*My personal interpretation (or favourite preacher) is equal to scripture.

-Even by reading the Bible in English you are standing and relying on the work of others in the greater church community.

-One of the best grids to explain this is known in association with John Wesley

(Methodist evangelical – 1700’s)

Wesleyan Quadrilateral:

Scripture

Tradition

Reason

Experience

(community experience over individual experience)

-(Explain the reversal often seen in churches today).

-This will not guarantee that we will figure out everything, or get everything right, but it is pretty certain to keep you from heresy.

Roger Olson, *The Mosaic Christian Belief”,* p. 68.

A Christian belief, then, is one that arises out of Scripture and points to Jesus Christ, is generally consistent with the consensual tradition of Christian thought, and is logically coherent with other Christian beliefs and illuminates the shared experience of Christians.

Questions:

1. How have you been guilty of thinking that your beliefs are from “the Bible alone”

without recognizing some of the bias you may be reading into the Bible?

2. Have you ever encountered someone else like this? What was that experience like? (explain)

3. What do you think of Roger Olson’s statement that:

“Christians should know their religious heritage including the Great Tradition or consensus of basic Christian belief as well as they know their Bible…. The Great Tradition is like a map or a compass.”

4. How do you think learning the Great Tradition helps us mature/become more aware of our bias and help us be more in line with the scriptures?

5. What do you find helpful in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (Scripture, Tradition, Reason, & Experience)?

6. Do you agree with Pastor Stef’s analysis that we often turn this Quadrilateral

upside down? (Why/Why not?)

7. What do you think are the dangers of turning this upside down?

8. Have you ever been guilty of doing this? (Explain)