

"The Challenge of Tradition"

Text: 2 Kings 17:6-14

God grant *not* that we prepare to receive the Christ Child into our hearts on Christmas Day, for surely he resides there even now, but that the Savior we now have might never leave, and that we might thereby be fully prepared for his great and awesome return when he comes to judge the living and the dead. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians: Tradition can be a tricky thing. G. K. Chesterton once wrote, "*Tradition means giving a vote to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about.*" Yet Chesterton also recognized the challenge of tradition, since he also wrote: "*Don't ever take a fence down until you know the reason why it was put up.*"

That's the challenge of tradition. Not every old way is the best way, or for that matter even a good way, but never dismiss the old way until you are sure you fully understand the "why" of it. Clinging to tradition in ignorance is formalism, and the danger with formalism is that it causes us to focus on the external (the "forms") to the exclusion of the internal. Formalism tells us to put lights on our Christmas trees without understanding that they symbolize Christ, the Light that entered our sin-darkened world on Christmas Day. Formalism tells us to set up Advent wreaths without understanding what each of the candles signifies. Formalism tells us to do what our forefathers did – without understanding what may or may not have given meaning to their actions.

The challenge of tradition is made all the more urgent when we recognize that some things *must* change, while others *never should*. While this is important in our day-to-day lives, it is absolutely critical to remember in our faith lives. Our text for this morning will illustrate the problem, and thereby also the importance that we get this right. That text is found in the Book of 2 Kings, the 17th Chapter:

ESV **(2 Kings 17:6-14)** *In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes. ⁷ And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods ⁸ and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in*

the customs that the kings of Israel had practiced. ⁹ And the people of Israel did secretly against the LORD their God things that were not right. They built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city. ¹⁰ They set up for themselves pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, ¹¹ and there they made offerings on all the high places, as the nations did whom the LORD carried away before them. And they did wicked things, provoking the LORD to anger, ¹² and they served idols, of which the LORD had said to them, "You shall not do this." ¹³ Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the Law that I commanded your fathers, and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets." ¹⁴ But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God.

This is God's Word – sure, certain, and verbally inspired by God himself. May that same Holy Spirit who gave us these words work powerfully in our hearts as we study them this morning. To that end we pray, "**Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth!**" Amen.

We are reminded yet again that we are to be active participants here, not spectators. These words are not only historically accurate, describing things that actually happened long ago, they were recorded and preserved as tools to be used by each one of us. The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:6-12: **Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. ⁷ Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." ⁸ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹ We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, ¹⁰ nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. ¹¹ Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. ¹² Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."**

When you fit all of this under the tent that is tradition, you can see the problem, the challenge. At the time our text was written, the Twelve Tribes of Israel had already been divided for some time. The northern

Ten Tribes called themselves Israel, and they had long before embraced syncretism.

Don't be intimidated by that word "*syncretism*." It represents something to be feared but, like a deadly snake that is loose in the nursery, we absolutely *need* to grab hold of it, subdue it, and master it, for syncretism is one of the deadliest killers of Christians around the world. It is not just what was killing people back then; it is exactly what is destroying countless souls today.

"Syncretism" comes from a compound Greek word that means, literally, "*with Cretans*." A Cretan was an inhabitant of the Island of Crete. You will recall what Paul, quoting a Cretan writer, said in Titus 1:12, "***One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.'***" Originally then the word referred to any ill-advised joining with Cretans. Today it refers (in the context of religion) to any attempt to combine various religions, or to pick and choose components from various religions to create your own hybrid belief system. That is exactly what the Jews did back then, and it destroyed them. It is also exactly what many Christians are doing today. The result is *always and only* spiritual catastrophe.

Our text tells us what happened to the Northern Ten Tribes of Israel: they were annihilated by the Assyrians. The people that were once part of God's chosen nation ceased to exist. Every single Christian should want to know why. We should be intensely interested in learning what happened so that the same thing never happens to us. What "happened" was syncretism. The Jews didn't just suddenly cast off the God that had formed them, brought them out of Egypt, performed countless miracles before their eyes, and established them in their own land. They *added* other gods, other religious practices. They had built temples to the true God in Dan and Bethel, but they also then built worship sites to the pagan idols of the peoples that were there before them. It was as if they reasoned that if one God was good, many gods would be even better. Once those other worship sites were erected, the worship of those gods became tradition. You get the problem. For many, idol worship undoubtedly morphed from something obviously and intentionally wicked into "the customs of our fathers." The pure evil was painted over by their love and respect for their parents and grandparents. "*If it was good enough for mom and dad, and grandma and grandpa...*" Thoughtlessness does not correct evil.

God in his Word was not and is not ambiguous as to just what he thinks about syncretism. He hates it, condemns it, and he rejects all who embrace it. Fast forward to the years following Jesus' death, resurrection,

and ascension. Evil men known as Judaizers infiltrated Christian congregations. They didn't promote the idea that Jesus had to be rejected; they claimed that more had to be added – like Old Testament rituals, including circumcision. They proclaimed the superior wisdom of syncretism – a little of this and a little of that and you will eventually get it just right. God the Holy Spirit's reaction, recorded in Paul's Letter to the Galatians: ***If you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. ⁴ You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.*** (Gal. 5:2-4 ESV) Adding to God's Word, adding anything at all to Christ crucified and grace, doesn't improve it, it destroys all.

Fast forward two thousand years to today. What do you see? More of the same. You need to learn to recognize it every time you hear someone famous talk about "*the great religions of the world*," every time you hear someone promote "*many paths to the same God*," every time someone picks out certain elements of the Christian faith and combines them with other spiritual beliefs to form their own hybrid religion. All of it is syncretism – the deadly practice of adding bad to what is good, perversion to what is pure. Every instance, every example, is always and only evil.

Two of the most common sweeteners that make this whole bile of syncretism palatable are human wisdom and tradition. In other words, syncretism is sold to those who want to be wise, kind, and inclusive, and then passed down to future generations as tradition. It becomes the time-share you can never get rid of. To put it another way, syncretism really only has to be sold once, since from that point on it is inherited as tradition.

Is that really a problem today? Clearly it is. Many of you know from bitter personal experience just how hard it is to tell someone that you love and respect that they are wrong. You know how difficult it is to evaluate for yourself the belief system that your parents and grandparents passed down to you. Worse still is the apparent harmlessness that often masks evil. Yet go back to our text for a bit. Do you suppose that someone walked up to the Jews and said, "*Here, this is evil in the sight of your God – pure poison that will condemn your soul to hell for all eternity. Do you want some?*" Evil is nearly always marketed as a harmless add-on, as a new and improved upgrade that is perfectly compatible with your old operating system. "*Did God really*

say...? Well God knows that if you just add the knowledge of good and evil to what you already have..."

So we ask again: Do we have anything like that today? A jolly red fat man comes to mind, as does dressing up like a witch or devil on Halloween. High schools that adopt mascots like "Satans" or "Demons." I've heard all of these things defended by Christians as harmless, something they just inherited, just tradition. Yet how do you think God sees it when we make light of what he sees as hideously evil? Would he want us to pass down to our children the tradition of believing in an essentially omnipotent being that rewards children if they have been good and punishes them when they have been bad. Is that pleasing to him – to teach our children to be good so that Santa, who knows and sees all, will reward them for their good behavior? The fact is nothing is harmless unless God says it is, just as nothing is good unless God says it is. Conversely, if God calls something evil, shame on us if we call it good – no matter who did it before us or for how long. We would ask someone from the Northern Tribes of Israel if this sort of thing is important, but they're not around anymore.

The same challenges show up in the area of theology. Passages are interpreted or applied in a certain way, and that understanding is passed down to us by our forefathers – both ancient and recent. Therein lies the challenge. Many were far smarter, wiser, and knew their Bibles better than we, yet they too were fallible human beings. Do we then just take their word for something so important, or do we investigate and verify everything for ourselves? Let's ask the question a different way. If someone told you that the ice was thick enough to support your brand-new pickup, would you just drive out onto it or would you test it yourself? Yet stuff can be replaced. Souls cannot.

And the challenge of tradition cuts both ways. Some fences have to be torn down, but never before we understand why they were built in the first place. Tradition doesn't get to dictate, but it certainly deserves a vote. What we often discover is that God himself ordered the building of most of our fences – barriers that even many Christian churches have now recklessly torn down. It is God himself that put the fence around human sexuality, confining it to marriage. God himself established the boundaries of marriage as between a man and a woman, as well as the roles of men and women in the home and in the church. It is God himself who commanded us to build a fence between ourselves and those who teach error. All of these fences, and countless others, have been or are being removed both by church and society. The results are as catastrophic as they are predictable.

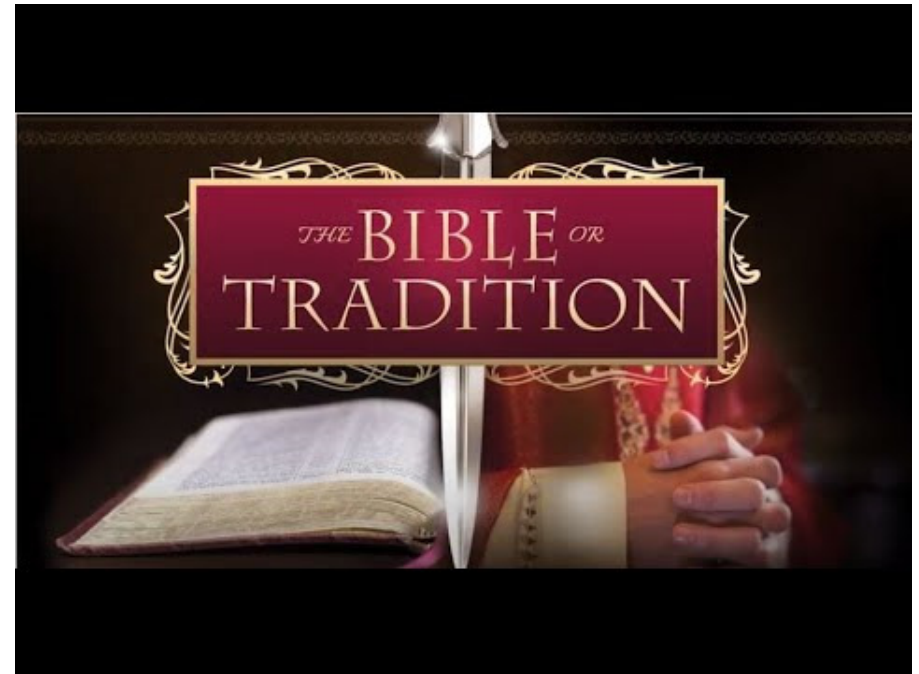
How then can we ever hope to meet such a challenge? How can we ever possibly know for certain what needs to be guarded and preserved and what needs to be condemned and discarded? Our Bibles. That sweet, pure, changeless Word of God. God did not, would not, leave us to fend for ourselves – as he did not leave the Jews to fend for themselves. He told them, warned them, over and over again, as he has also now warned us.

God did not give us his Word because he hates us, but because he loves us. He did not build his fences to oppress us; he built them to protect and save us. In his Word we learn what in our lives is true and what is false, what must be kept and what must be discarded. There we learn how forgiveness and life eternal can be our own personal possession only through faith alone in Jesus Christ, and how every other salvation plan leads only to eternal death and destruction. The only safe course of action is therefore to continually evaluate and reevaluate *everything* that we have inherited, *everything* that we do, *everything* that we teach, and *everything* that we pass down to our children – all on the basis of God's Word alone – ruthlessly discarding all that God in his Word condemns and guarding with our very lives all that is truly good. So help us God. Amen.

ESV **Philippians 4:4-9** Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.
5 Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; 6
do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and
supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7
And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your
hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 ¶ Finally, brothers, whatever is
true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever
is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is
anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 What you have
learned and received and heard and seen in me--practice these things,
and the God of peace will be with you.

ESV **Luke 7:18b-23** John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to
the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for
another?" 20 And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the
Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or
shall we look for another?'" 21 In that hour he healed many people of
diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he
bestowed sight. 22 And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you
have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers
are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have
good news preached to them. 23 And blessed is the one who is not
offended by me."

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captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria and
placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the
cities of the Medes. 7 ¶ And this occurred because the people of Israel
had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of
the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had
feared other gods 8 and walked in the customs of the nations whom the
LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the
kings of Israel had practiced. 9 And the people of Israel did secretly
against the LORD their God things that were not right. They built for
themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city.
10 They set up for themselves pillars and Asherim on every high hill and
under every green tree, 11 and there they made offerings on all the high
places, as the nations did whom the LORD carried away before them. And
they did wicked things, provoking the LORD to anger, 12 and they served
idols, of which the LORD had said to them, "You shall not do this." 13 Yet
the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer,
saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my
statutes, in accordance with all the Law that I commanded your fathers,
and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets." 14 But they would not
listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in
the LORD their God.



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The 3rd Sunday in Advent – December 15, 2024

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 68 (Red Hymnal)

"The Advent of Our King"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Epistle Lesson: (Philippians 4:4-9) Our First Lesson offers some solid, practical, divine counsel on just what Christians should regard as the perfect example of conduct at all times. The world dismisses such counsel as too vague or too simplistic to work "in the real world." God does not make such mistakes. Having given us such guidance, we can and should be fully convinced that taking these things to heart and incorporating them into our lives is as timely as it is God-pleasing.

Psalm 85 (Supplement page 40) (Brown Hymnal)

The Gospel Lesson: (Luke 7:18b-23) John the Baptist may have sent his disciples to Jesus for several reasons. He certainly understood that his followers had to be directed away from himself to Jesus – who was the object of John's work and preparation. Still today society would have us believe that there is something "beyond Jesus." That is simply not true. By any measure, there is nothing on earth more important than Jesus.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 72 (Stanzas 1-3) (Red Hymnal)

"Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers"

The Sermon – Text: 2 Kings 17:6-14 (Printed on the back of this bulletin)

"The Challenge of Tradition"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 72 (Stanza 4) (Red Hymnal)

"Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers"

The Prayers of the Day followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn - 50 (Red Hymnal)

"Lord, Dismiss Us with Thy Blessing"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States and around the world. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again.

Attendance – Sunday (41) Average (38) Wednesday (26)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Advent Service
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Pastor Drew Naumann has returned the call to Faith of Manchester, MO. That congregation has now called Pastor George Dummann. Pastor Del Maas is considering the call to St. Stephen of San Francisco.

Advent Services – Our final Midweek Advent service is scheduled for this Wednesday (December 18) at 7:00 pm.

Annual Voters Meeting Notes – Chip Stroschein was accepted into voting membership. The 2025 Budget was adopted with an increase of 1% over 2024. Mark Johnson and Mick Johnson were re-elected to the Church Council and Phil Pfennig was re-elected to the Board of Elders. A change related to the timing of acceptance of new members in the St Paul Constitution was adopted. The estimate of St Paul's FY26 contributions to the CLC's Cooperative Budget Plan (CBP) was set at \$14,000. Installation of the 2025 Church Council is scheduled for Sunday, December 22nd and the next Council meeting for Monday, January 27th.

Christmas Week Schedule – Our annual Christmas Eve service is scheduled for Tuesday, December 24th at 5:00 p.m., followed by our Christmas Day service at 10:00 a.m. on the 25th.