

STANDING FIRM AND HOLDING FAST

Joshua 1:1-9 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 (text: verses 15-17)

Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ, to live as a Christian is often described in the Bible with military metaphors. Paul exhorts us to “*fight the good fight of faith*” and so on. In our text this morning he exhorts us to “stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught.” Sometimes that seems difficult and, of course, holding on merely is never good enough. Yet we will never move forward unless we do, first of all, hold on. And there is a special need for this in times of disarray, in times of all sorts of conflicting philosophies when Christianity is under attack – and it certainly is in New Zealand at the present time. An article in a recent ‘Challenge’ newspaper described our Prime Minister as one who suffers from Theophobia. I thought that was quite good really – according to the modern misunderstanding of the word phobia by which it has become no longer fear, but hatred. It’s true, she does hate God. And there is consequently – not just because of her; we won’t lay it all at her feet – but there is consequently a rabid attack on everything that is Christian in our country.

Well, as we saw a couple of Sundays ago the Thessalonian Christians were also suffering attack both from outside and from within. From outside their number they suffered persecution. From within them they had people who claimed to have new messages from the Spirit, or even to have had a letter from Paul and Silas and Timothy telling them that the Day of the Lord had already arrived and that they had missed out on its greatness.

So Paul tells them in our chapter not to be disturbed, not to be shaken about these things but rather to keep their composure. “*Remember,*” he says in verse five, “*we told you about these things when we were with you.*” It’s a little bit hard for us to know now exactly what Paul spoke about and when the things he was talking about were going to happen. And our immediate situation is different. Time has gone on and we now have the whole of Scripture to read and put together some of what Paul is talking about. Yet there are aspects in which these Christians were being disturbed that apply to us still today.

- We still have people come and say that they have received messages directly from the Lord.
- Disturbing things still happen in the world.
- Persecution still goes on and it will until the Lord Jesus comes back. And the horrible and vicious way in which it has come to the Lord’s people in the past, and still today in other parts of the world, may possibly come to us some time in the future.
- But even without that we still have these false philosophies, these false teachings around us, to resist so that we are not confused and led away from the Lord.

So Paul’s message still speaks to us today. And what exactly is his message? His message is this: “*So then brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us*” (v.15).

We need to spend a few moments to understand what Paul is talking about when he uses this word tradition.

- Some people have said that when Paul talks about traditions here he is talking about some extra teachings he had alongside the Bible. Probably they came from Jewish rabbinical sources and they probably had to do with details about how to worship or how to rule the church and so on.

- The Roman Catholic Church has a similar view. It says there is alongside the Scripture, church tradition and we have got to hold fast to these church traditions as the church teaches us to do.

But these ideas can't be right, congregation, because of the way the word Paul uses is used in other parts of the New Testament.

- For example in Matthew chapter fifteen, verse six, Jesus refers to Jewish traditions as something distinct from what was in the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament, and he doesn't speak nicely about those traditions! In fact he says, "*You elevate your human traditions above Scripture and you invalidate Scripture by your traditions.*" You subject Scripture to the test of your traditions and you disobey Scripture to obey your traditions! So it is hardly likely that Paul would use the word in that sense when Jesus says that sort of thing about human traditions.
- There are other places where he uses the word as well but one is particularly interesting. In 1 Corinthians chapter eleven, verse two, Paul says, and I will read it as he spoke it, "*I praise you because you remember me in everything and you keep the traditions just as I traditioned you.*" Our Bibles have "*taught*" there, or a word like that, and of course we have to do that in English. But Paul used the word as a verb. He says "*I traditioned you.*" In other words, then, in Scripture traditions simply means the teachings of the Gospel.

But there is another very important reason – and this is the point Paul wants to make – why these traditions that he's speaking about must mean Scripture and they cannot mean something extra to Scripture: if they are extra to Scripture they cannot be as important as Scripture. Because surely, the most important teachings God wants us to have would be in Scripture. And Paul says, "In the face of the disquiet that is among you and the confusion that is being brought to you by these false revelations (which he had referred to in verse two), he says, "Stand fast in the face of them, hold fast to the traditions, the teachings that you were taught."

Let me illustrate what Paul is saying. If one of you fathers gets the boat out and goes fishing on Saturday afternoon with your children and a storm comes up and the boat begins to sink, you don't yell out to the kids, "Hang on to that fishing rod!" You forget about fishing rods. You say, "Hang on to the dinghy!" or "Hang on to the life raft!" You tell them to hang on to the most solid thing around that will hold them up.

That is the sort of situation into which Paul is speaking here and that is the sort of thing he is saying. If I put it in terms of our present situation in NZ, this is what he's saying; everything is all at sea in our culture at the present time; everything is up for grabs; everything is under attack and Paul says, "Don't allow yourselves to get confused by all this. Stand firm, hold fast to the traditions. Hold fast to the weighty truths that you've been taught." And when it is an urgent or a desperate situation, you don't talk about secondary things; you talk about primary things, the most important things. And they are the sorts of things that Paul is talking about and they are recorded for us in the Scriptures. So let me answer three questions about this now.

1. WHY MUST WE HOLD ON?

There's an obvious answer to that of course and that is because if you don't, you'll let go and drown. But there are two things I want to say about this: why must we hold on?

Firstly because what you have been taught is eternal truth and it doesn't change. And maybe that is why it even came to be called a tradition, because it has been held on to for a long time and it is passed on down through the generations. Actually that is a good part of the meaning of the word. Tradition refers not so much to what has been taught as to how it is taught. It is passed on from teacher to pupil, from parent to child.

This teaches us something very important about Christianity. It comes from God and it doesn't change therefore. In verse fourteen, Paul talks about these traditions, his teachings, as "*our Gospel*." In verse thirteen he calls them "*the truth*." He called his teachings his Gospel simply because it was the message that he brought, but it wasn't his in the sense that he originated it. Let me demonstrate that.

- In 1 Corinthians fourteen, verse thirty-seven, Paul says, "*If any of you people thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things that I write to you are the Lord's commandment.*"
- In 1 Corinthians chapter fifteen, verse three, he says, "*I traditioned to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died and was buried and rose again for our sins according to the Scriptures.*"

Paul received his teachings from God. They were the Lord's commandment and therefore he only passed them on, he traditioned them. Furthermore, he says, "*They were according to the Scriptures.*" And here is something else that is important. The Scriptures don't change. They are the eternal truth because they are the word of the eternal God who doesn't change.

In the book of Deuteronomy we are given two tests to determine whether someone who claims he is a prophet really is a prophet of God. The first test is: if he brings a prediction about the future, that prediction, indeed every prediction he ever makes, must come true. I have caught out every prophet I've ever met – and, believe it or not, one meets a few! – on that test alone. But there is a second test – and a second test is necessary because remember the devil also does lying wonders (verse nine) and so false prophets can come along and they might make a prediction and it might come true! But the second test is this: a true prophet will never lead God's people to worship another god. A true prophet will never contradict anything God has said in the past. So Paul says, "*If you had remembered what we had told you before, when we were with you, you wouldn't be all upset now about these conflicting messages.*"

Stand firm therefore. Hold fast to what has been taught. It was the truth of the God who does not change. It is a sure anchor in the storms of life. But it's more than that – and so **the other reason why we must hold on is this: because it gives "*eternal comfort and good hope by grace.*"**

Actually, I think the NIV is better here. It has "*eternal encouragement.*" The word can be translated in a number of different ways according to the context. But I think the word encouragement is right here. The Word of God is eternal and what it does for us is eternal. It gives us an eternal comfort, eternal encouragement and an eternal good hope.

Now where can you get that these days? Or in any age in history? You can only ever get something that lasted for a while, a period of time. But we live in an age of obsolescence. In fact the cynics will say, planned obsolescence. The computer programme you bought five years ago is no good today; you have to go and buy another one. That's even how we are beginning to approach things like marriage. In case it doesn't last, we have it all worked out

beforehand how we'll divvy everything up when the time comes. Or what about motherhood even? That is sometimes – although I don't think it should be – but that is sometimes the very strongest human relationship. And Isaiah asks, "*Can a mother forget her child?*" Yes, in fact, sometimes it happens.

So Paul is saying: in the midst of all this transience and this unreliability and this short shelf-life and fast-arriving use-by dates; in the midst of these messages and philosophies that come today and are gone tomorrow – and yet people give themselves to these teachings. They spend lots of money on them – in the midst of this environment in which the theories we believe in and committed our health to yesterday are disproved today, Paul says, "*Stand firm, hold to the traditions for they are about the Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father who has loved us and given us eternal encouragement and good hope*" (verses 16-17).

It's pretty hard often to get encouragement isn't it, let alone hope? It's all doom and gloom. Who has hope today, let alone a good hope? For example, we thought we'd learned it all with two world wars in the last century. But now Mr Blair is asking for international law to be changed so that, I quote, "*Brutal regimes can be dealt with.*" There's not a lot of hope in a statement like that, is there? I understand that these men are grappling with great and vicious and evil forces in the world but that sounds like a request to open the door to a new militarism to me.

And so it's true, congregation, things in the West are morally and spiritually very dark and maybe in these other ways – militarily and politically – as well. The Middle East looks very dark. Africa looks very dark. Just as things in Thessalonica looked dark to the Christians then. But in the midst of that darkness Paul reminds us that we have an eternal encouragement and an eternal good hope because God and the Lord Jesus Christ has loved us. God so loved us that he gave his only begotten son. Jesus himself so loved us that he gave himself.

Furthermore, we have this eternal encouragement and good hope from the love of God by grace. You go and try and get inner peace and well-being from the Indian holy men or western or eastern new-age spirituality practitioners. There's no grace about it. Not in the least. It costs you dollars and cents. But with God, with the genuine article, it is free – from the love of God, by pure grace, at the cost of the blood of his son. All that is required is for you to recognize your need, acknowledge your blame and cry to the Lord for mercy and he is willing and ready to save.

So people of God, that is why we must stand firm, that is why we must hold on in the midst of all these passing currents and dark clouds swirling around us – because God has given us, and what we must hang on to is, the eternal truth of the unchanging God who in his Son has loved us and given us eternal encouragement and good hope by grace.

2. HOW WILL WE HOLD ON?

we come back to this question of tradition again. Think back to about 460BC, eighty years after the Jews had returned from captivity in Babylon, and they'd come back to Jerusalem and things were not going well. They were committing all the same sorts of sins that God had sent them to Babylon for 150 years earlier – breaking the Sabbath, marrying unbelievers and so on. it was a very disappointing and discouraging time. But then we read in the last book of the Old Testament that "*those who feared the Lord, spoke to one another and the Lord gave attention and heard it*" (Malachi 3:16).

The truth of the Bible and its eternal encouragement and good hope is not just something written down. It's something that we are to take up and encourage one another with. It is something that we pass on to each other – even as the preaching of the Gospel, through the human voice, is the power of God to salvation. That's what a tradition is. We're inclined to think of a tradition as something that's old and dead, but it's not. A tradition is a living thing that is passed on. And it's this passing it on and sharing it with one another that makes it live in our hearts. Now we are all to do this with each other, but especially, brothers, are we, as minister and elders and deacons. The work of the deacon too, is first of all a work of the Word of God.¹

Yet there is something else important about how we hold on and that is this. When I was studying this passage, I read John Calvin and he says this, “*We should hear nothing but empty sound if our doctrine is not endued with power by the Holy Spirit.*” In other words, congregation, we'll only hold on if we depend on God alone. In verse fifteen, Paul is exhorting them to “*hold on and stand fast.*” But in verse sixteen and seventeen he is praying. “*Now may the Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father encourage and strengthen your hearts.*”

We can have all the best intentions. We can have fierce determination. We can have the most eloquent and well thought out words. But it will all do nothing unless we are praying people, depending on the Lord wholly and alone. And brothers, we have to be praying elders and deacons, asking the Lord really to do the work that we go to do.

3. FOR WHAT PURPOSE MUST WE HOLD ON?

Paul prays that “*the Lord Jesus Christ himself and God the Father encourage and strengthen your hearts in every good word and work.*” Ephesians chapter 2 says, “*For we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.*”

We haven't been saved for nothing, congregation. We haven't been saved just for our comfort, much less for an easy ride. We have a purpose, we have a task – as Christians, as church and as office bearers – that we stand firm, that we hold to the traditions that we have been taught and that the Father and Son encourage and strengthen our hearts in every good word and work – whatever sort of work it is;

- bringing up your children for the Lord, parents;
- doing your studies at school or at university, children and young people;
- working at our trade or our profession;
- providing a quiet and Christian home life;
- as minister, elders, deacons, visiting the people, bringing the Word of God to them “*according to the need of the moment to build them up in their faith*”;
- as a church teaching our youth and seeking to take the Gospel to others round about us.

The Church is the pillar and ground of truth in the world. Therefore we are to hold fast the word of life and appear as lights in the crooked and perverse generation that our world has become and as it was in Paul's day (quoting from Philippians). Congregation, if we don't do that, there'll be no light in this world. But we can do it. We can stand firm. We can hold to

¹ The particular reference to elders and deacons is because we had earlier in the Service ordained a new elder and deacon.

what we have been taught because already in eternity “*God has chosen us for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth*” (verse thirteen); because two thousand years ago, Christ died for us and in the course of our lives even while we were sinners, even though we were the enemies of Christ, “he called us through the Gospel” to gain this glory, the glory of, among other things, once again being true children of the living God, living in good works, living according to the living Word. Or, as Paul puts it in verse sixteen, “*Already he has loved us and given us eternal encouragement and good hope by grace.*”

Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ, that is why we may pray that God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ will continue to encourage and strengthen our hearts – because he already has loved us. He chose us in eternity and the Father, at the cost of his Son, and the Son, at the cost of his own life, bought us and therefore we can be sure that he will now continue to give his Holy Spirit to strengthen us in every good work and word. So, people of God, with that promise, go and serve your Lord.

Amen.

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