

# Tradition, Scripture, Reason, and Fideism

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I love my family. We enjoy each other's company. Our family has some great traditions that we practice. We hold hands during prayer. We love to go on summer vacations. We like pancakes and bacon. I take my kids to school in the car every day. We love playing musical instruments. Of course, around the end of the year we have great times together during the holidays. One tradition that has developed in the most recent years is that between Thanksgiving and Christmas, each of us gets on a computer, and we play Minecraft together. This is a computer game in which the player collects materials and builds structures while fighting off creepers, skeletons, and zombies. I love our family traditions! Nevertheless, I know that one day, if my wife and I do our job right, our children will start families of their own, and our traditions will change, but traditions are just that, traditions.

Many years ago, a good brother wrote a book titled, "Traditions of Men vs. The Word of God." In this book, he lists various different religious practices in one column, and in the second column he put what God's word said. I've always thought that this was a helpful little book because it really brought out the notion that we need to go back to the word of God to establish religious authority, a concept that I have sought to champion over the years. Jesus promoted this same notion when he said to the Pharisees and Scribes, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men" ([Mark 7:6-8](#)). Religious traditions that have no scriptural foundation are spiritually deadly, and like Jesus, we must do our best to oppose them. Theologically, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was highly instrumental in pushing religion in this direction. He sought to respond to the modernistic attacks on Christianity in his time, but his response really weakened religion to a point that destroyed its objectivity. Schleiermacher reduced religion to intuition, or feelings. He wrote, "Religion's essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling. It wishes to intuit the universe" ([Schleiermacher](#)). Schleiermacher bought into the notion that it was impossible to go back to scripture for objective truth, and that real religion was ultimately divorced from doctrines of any kind. He said:

Dogmas are not, properly speaking, part of religion: rather it is that they are derived from it. Religion is the miracle of direct relationship with the infinite; and dogmas are the reflection of this miracle. Similarly belief in God, and in personal immortality, are not necessarily a part of religion; one can conceive of a religion without God, and it would be pure contemplation of the universe; the desire for personal immortality seems rather to show a lack of religion, since religion assumes a desire to lose oneself in the infinite, rather than to preserve one's own finite self (*On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, 1799).

But his rejection of doctrine really had the opposite effect because where feelings and intuitions prevail, so also do traditions and the mentality of "This is the way that we

have always done it.” And since, according to this point of view, scripture cannot be appealed to in an objective way, what follows is the erection of man-made creeds to define exactly what a particular denomination is going to believe, and thus traditions are elevated to the position of doctrine.

The early 19th century religious movement known as the Great Awakening also contributed to the notion that religion is a “better felt than told” experience. The movement was a reaction to the Enlightenment and its desire to subjugate all things, including religion, to human reason. Many considered that the Modernism of the Enlightenment was destroying religion. Calvinism gained a resurgence during this period because its teachings were consistent with the notion that human reason was not required at all for salvation. During the Great Awakening, the “saved” would wallow around on the ground and utter great ejaculatory cries as evidence that the Holy Spirit had saved them. Out of this backlash to Modernism, Schleiermacher’s philosophy of religion and the Great Awakening’s practical application of the same thoughts, among other things, produced the Romantic movement of the 19th century.

And Romanticism is yet with us today. It displays itself in a haughty fideism, which the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines it as the idea that “reason is unnecessary and inappropriate for the exercise and justification of religious belief”

([Fideism](#)). Practically, fideism displays itself in traditionalism, the “we’ve always done it this way” mentality. Of course, these traditions are codified in the denominational world through creeds, confessions of faith, and catechisms of one sort or another. However, these are not the only avenues through which fideism infects and destroys the faith of many.

Another avenue is through misunderstanding of scripture. For example, take [Matthew 18:20](#), “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” I have heard this verse quoted countless times to justify low numbers in church attendance, and to support the notion that even the few have the Lord’s blessing. I also have been guilty of using this scripture incorrectly. This is not to say that the Lord is not with the faithful few when they meet; He is! But this is not the verse to support that kind of thinking. (Try [Hebrews 13:5](#) instead.) The context of [Matthew 18](#) concerns Jesus’ teaching about repentance and forgiveness especially in relationship to when a brother sins against another brother. Jesus is teaching us in [Matthew 18:20](#) that he will support the testimony of two or three witnesses in relationship to someone who commits sin; the verse has nothing to do with low numbers in attendance or the notion that God is with the faithful few. Why has it been so misused? Fideism. Rationality has been divorced from faith when it comes to this passage so that one’s personal beliefs about this verse override all thinking in relationship to the content of the chapter. And for some people, it wouldn’t matter how long you explained this context, they would look at you and say, “this is the way I’ve always believed it.”

Fideism destroys the faith of many because when they are asked to give an answer for what they believe ([1 Peter 3:15](#)), they simply respond, “I just believe it,” without giving any additional evidence for their faith. The problem is that God has made us rational

creatures—it is part of what it means to be created in His image—and when we deny rationality, we are also denying an essential part of what it means to be human. Eventually we work ourselves into a psychological conundrum. We can't hold onto our faith and our rationality at the same time. We end up in a mental circumstance known as cognitive dissonance, simultaneously believing two contradictory things at the same time. With the strong pressure from society to define religious beliefs in terms of the subjective, the discomfort of cognitive dissonance leads many people to abandon their religious beliefs in favor of their rationality. The problem isn't that there is an objective conflict between reason and faith, rather, the conflict is within the subjective definition that is put upon faith. Fideistic attitudes come out when individuals fail at presenting rational cases. They perceive that the failure is within human reason, not in their own abilities, and as a result, they end up professing fideism. Others consider thinking just too hard to do, and so they abandon it altogether for unjustified belief. Fideism also displays itself in specious arguments that many in the religious world make. "Just believe and you will be saved" is perhaps the most common profession of fideism in the denominational world. However, members of Christ's body have their own problems with fideism. Much of this stems from cherished brotherhood beliefs that have been handed down from a precious mentor of one kind or another. "Brother so-and-so couldn't have been wrong about this. Could he?" is a commonly asked question. Of course, the answer is that good ol' brother so-and-so could very well have been wrong about a number of things. Putting our faith in the beliefs of men is a sure path to fideism, because when such beliefs are challenged by reason and found lacking, we may hold onto them without evidence just because brother so-and-so was so dear to us. Such thinking needs to be challenged.

In this vein, someone once asked me whether Christianity was a religion that could be falsified. The word "falsified" in this statement doesn't mean "proved to be false." This is a common misunderstanding of this technical jargon. Rather, the word "falsified" in this context refers to whether the truths presented in Christianity are subject to the principle of falsification which is the idea that it is merely possible to have some empirical evidence demonstrating otherwise. For example, was the resurrection of Jesus falsifiable? Yes, inasmuch as it was possible to present the dead body of Jesus to those who claimed that He had risen from the dead. This doesn't mean that Jesus didn't, in fact, rise from the dead, only that there was the possibility that empirical evidence could be presented that demonstrated otherwise. But fideism says that religious truths simply cannot be falsified at all—that none of them are subject to the process of falsification. The argument for the existence of God from personal experience utilizes this very idea. For the one who presents the argument, it is impossible to falsify the things that he says, because they are not subject to empirical scrutiny, and once again the result is fideism—faith completely and utterly divorced from reason.

We should be clear that fideism is not what the Bible teaches on the topic of faith. Jesus himself gave clear empirical evidence to Thomas when asked for it ([John 20:27](#)). We also know that God granted miracles to the apostles in order for them to demonstrate that their teaching was true ([Mark 16:20](#), [Hebrews 2:3](#)). And the apostle John gave evidence in writing to anyone who would read his epistle when he said, "Many other

signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name” ([John 20:30-31](#)). The process of giving evidence so that one may, by that evidence, judge something to be true assumes that an individual who sees the evidence will use his rationality to deduce that such evidence could only demonstrate the working of God and the confirmation of God’s truth. Such is not a fideistic process. Moreover, Peter makes it clear that we are to be ready to give evidence for what we believe: “but sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord: being ready always to give answer to every man that asketh you a reason concerning the hope that is in you, yet with meekness and fear” ([1 Peter 3:15](#)). Moreover, such evidence is not to be faulty, nor based upon our own personal opinions, subjective affection for brethren, or lacking in truth content. John exhorts us to test and try those who teach, because we must discern right from wrong, and every single brother or sister who teaches is subject to such a process. He says, “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world” ([1 John 4:1](#)).

Additionally, one must not go to the opposite extreme and say that all truth must be filtered through the lens of human reason. This is rationalism. There are some truths that God has chosen to reveal that cannot be tested with human reason, such as the promise of eternal life. Believing such truths is not fideism, because one is not suggesting that the basis for such truths cannot in any way be scrutinized by reason. To the contrary, God’s existence is very much a matter that is scrutinized by human reason, but once we prove that God exists and that He has told us something, His word must be true because it comes from Him. I am not referring to some god that can lie, but to the God who cannot lie ([Titus 1:2](#)). Hence, the truth that cannot be verified by human reason, is still true simply because we know God said it, not because we have sufficient evidence for its truthfulness intrinsically. A very thorough going Fideism states that no religious teachings are subject to human reason. The obvious fallacy in such a statement is that that very statement is being professed by human reason. Ultimately, any religious statement made will be backed by evidence or it won’t. If it isn’t, then the person professing such a statement is fideistic, at least in that one belief.

Practically, God’s people cannot afford to be fideists. The souls of men are at stake! Moreover, truth is defendable, and infidelity can be conquered if we will apply the necessary effort to study and learn the arguments of the enemy. This will require some real effort on the part of some, and it will require some humility on the part of others who must admit that they do not have the necessary tools to do an adequate job of defending the faith given their lack of knowledge on the subject. Nevertheless, such individuals may learn, grow, and become very capable of doing a good job if they will admit their own personal inadequacies and seek to correct their errors. May God help us not to fall into the trap of fideism, for we desire to be neither Pharisees nor infidels.