

Traditions and the Gospel

Introduction:

Every culture has its manifold traditions. Indeed, culture and traditions are often synonymous. History has shown that when the pure truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ penetrates a culture, it will challenge cultural traditions. The Light of gospel truth penetrates the darkness, and much of secular and religious culture is manifold darkness.

A Two fold dilemma:

We must sort out and resist those traditions that are man-made and against the truth of the Gospel; and secondly, we must affirm those traditions that are from the Gospel and thus are good traditions.

Also, many cultural traditions are “neutral” in that they are not evil just simply cultural legends passed down from generation to generation.

Definitions: What is a tradition?

The Greek word that is used in the New Testament is “*paradosia*” it is a combination of two Greek words- *para*=above or over & the Greek word- *dokeo*= to give. Thus a tradition is “*to give over to*” This is the fundamental meaning of traditions. They are ideas, customs, beliefs, stories, and cultural habits that a group “gives over to.” They embrace them as truth and give them over to the next generation.

There are many kinds of traditions, some are tribal, some are cultural (many tribes doing the same tradition), some are religious; some are evil and demonic.

Example: In John chapter 13 is the story of Jesus washing the disciple’s feet. It was never meant as a tradition, but only as an illustration of servant hood. However, there are Christian groups that have made it a doctrine, a lifestyle, a part of their traditional way of life. In Kentucky there are “Foot washing Baptists.” They have made foot washing as a regular part of their worship.

Culturally Conditioned or Abidingly Relevant

The challenge to any Biblical theologian or student is to discern what is “*culturally conditioned*” and what is “*abidingly relevant.*” In doing so, he hopefully can remove bad traditions from the life of the Church, and keep those Godly traditions that bless the Church.

See Mark 7:1-15 & Matthew 15: 1-20

Both Matthew and Mark record an event in Jesus’ life where He encountered Jewish religious traditions which stood in the way of truth. The Pharisees held their traditions (interpretations) over the commandment of Moses. They gave it more importance than God’s law. In **Mark 7:13** Jesus says to them, “*you invalidate the word of God by your tradition which you handed down; and you do many such things like that.*” They did it then, and we do it now! Jesus resisted such traditions and we must do likewise. We must discern what is only cultural; and what is eternal truth. We must discern what is abidingly relevant in any age or culture

Question: What traditions has the Church adopted that we hold equal to or greater than the Gospel? What traditions have we “added to” the Gospel that have changed the Good News into man-made bad news? As we look carefully at both cultural traditions and even denominational traditions, we like Jesus will need to sort out what to keep. Some traditions can and will advance the Gospel, others will not.

Guidelines for discerning the value in a tradition:

Guideline #1-Where did the tradition come from? What is its source?

Explain: This was the method of Jesus and the Apostles regarding traditions. Jesus often began his teaching on traditions by saying, “*You have heard it said by men of old...but I say unto you...*”

Jesus as the living Word of God knew the difference between a worthy tradition and a man-made custom that distorts truth or is added in the place of truth.

Christ’s example regarding traditions:

1. He kept the Law of Moses- none could accuse Him of breaking the Law.
Jesus honored the Decalogue as God’s truth given to Moses.
2. He resisted and often rejected the Mishnah (the 613 Talmudic laws of the Rabbis)
Jesus did not always agree with rabbinical interpretations of the Law, and many times broke their rules intentionally in order to teach the truth.
3. Jesus gave us the New Covenant to fulfill the Old and created new traditions for His Church to live by.

Paul’s example regarding Traditions:

1. Paul was a learned Rabbi, schooled in the Law. See **Galatians 1:14** “*I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.*”
As a devout Jew he sought to keep the Law and the traditions of his people.
2. Paul had to re-evaluate his childhood traditions in the light of the Gospel and began to reject those traditions not worthy of the Gospel.
He refused to burden his gentile brethren with circumcision, dietary rules, and feast days etc. that were common to the Jews. See **Col. 2:16-23**
2. Paul followed Christ’s example in establishing new traditions based on the Gospel.
His teachings and instructions became Church traditions. ““”*stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.*” **2nd Thessalonians 2:15**; then again he says, “*...keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.*” **2nd Thessalonians 3:6**

Summary of Guideline #1- The Gospel when correctly taught and lived out brings with it those good traditions that advance the Gospel. It also will expose false and useless traditions that hinder the Gospel. We today must do as Christ and the Apostles did-Reject those traditions that hinder the Gospel and embrace those New Testament traditions that advance the Gospel.

Guideline #2-Is it from God or is it man made? Paul tells the Corinthian church “*hold firmly to the traditions just as I delivered them to you.*” **1st Cor. 11:2**

Explain:

Paul came to Corinth and led many to Christ, then began to teach them both the Gospel (doctrine) and also, many instructions (traditions). Among those traditions was teaching about the observance of the Lord's Supper. Observing the Lord's Supper meal is a Christ given tradition. Jesus told his followers to gather and eat the meal as a way to remember Jesus and His sacrificial death on the Cross.

The early church had many good traditions handed down by Christ and the Apostles. These traditions were often instructions about various matters like foods, holidays, elders, church policies and behaviors within the Church. The Apostles had established those traditions which are "ABIDINGLY RELEVANT" in any age. They had removed and rejected those traditions which were "CULTURALLY CONDITIONED".

APPLY:

Each Christian generation must examine its traditions. Have we taken cultural traditions which are culturally conditioned and made them abidingly relevant? This is a gross error. The Jews did that and missed the Messiah because of it.

Illustration: The Church in Corinth was guilty of changing and abusing the Lord's Supper. Rather than using the Supper to remember Christ and His sacrifice on the Cross, they made it into a wild, indulgent drinking party. The tradition was being changed as to its meaning and practice.

Much of 1st Corinthians chapter 11 is concerned with correction from the Apostle regarding the misuse of traditions.

History of the Passover tradition into the New Testament Church

When we look at the evolution of the Jewish tradition of Passover, we can see how traditions change and often morph into something entirely different than when they began.

The Passover observance was a God directed tradition given by Moses to remember how God delivered the tribe of Israel out of Egyptian bondage. The Hebrews were instructed to put the blood over the door posts of their houses so the Death Angel would see the blood and "pass over." The Egyptian houses without this Blood over them were not spared but the first born died, even Pharaoh's son.

This passing over event became a Hebrew tradition celebrated in Jewish homes from that time onward. It is celebrated in a "Seder" meal with many symbolic portions of the meal-all remembering God's rescue of the nation Israel from Egypt. It was this traditional Seder meal that Jesus ate with his disciples the night of his betrayal by Judas.

The changing of a Tradition

Jesus kept the Passover tradition, but He also changed it forever. He moved the past into the present and future. He told his disciples that the ancient Passover is a type and shadow of God's Passover on the Cross, when the blood of the Lamb of God would not be smeared over the doors, BUT UPON THE WOODEN CROSS. His blood will allow God to pass over our sins. Thus, Jesus turned an Old Covenant tradition into a New Covenant Church ordinance. He made it a "new remembrance;" not remembering Egypt's Passover, but a remembrance of

His sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. The Lord's Supper was to be celebrated as a remembering of Christ's death and resurrection. It was never meant to be more than that-a reverent remembering of Christ and His Cross in our behalf. Later the Roman Church will make the Supper into a Sacrifice with saving merit. In so doing a tradition is changed into a means of Grace and thus a Doctrine added to the Gospel! This then becomes a good tradition gone bad!

Apply;

Each generation must evaluate the history of its traditions, consider its source, origins and merit. Always weight it against the truth of the scriptures.

Paul's comments about women and length of hair

Paul raises issues like the length of a man's hair in comparison to a woman's and the issue of a woman covering her head in prayer. These customs are culturally conditioned but can teach us eternal principles that arise out of the Gospel.

Paul's eternal Principle=God's order for men and women is that a man has headship over the woman and there is to be distinctive differences in men and woman in the way they dress and behave.

Illustration: The Masai tribe in East Africa has the unusual custom of the young men growing their hair long during initiation rites into manhood. The women always have short hair. The long hair worn by the Moran (young warrior) is a mark of his manhood. After he is initiated into manhood, he will cut his hair. The idea is that he is a MAN, not a woman!

Apply: God would not approve of a cultural tradition where men and women dressed alike and behaved as one gender. We are not to be trans-sexual, cross-dressers, or the like.

Summary of Guideline #2

We must ask is the tradition Biblical. Does it advance and testify to the Gospel. If not, then it is man-made and must be rejected. This was the teaching of Jesus as He came up against the organized traditions of Judaism in His day. The Jews had taken God's Ten Commandments and added 613 Talmudic rules to God's Ten! Their traditions stood between them and God's Messiah.

Guideline #3- What is the Motive behind the Tradition?

Explain: a God given tradition will always point to Christ, and the Gospel. A Godly tradition will give God glory! The motive behind the tradition will be pure, not fleshly, man centered, nor self-serving. This explains why Jesus rejected the outward show of religion he saw in the religion of the Scribes and Pharisees. They loved to be seen of men doing their religious duties (traditions).

This is the context of **Matthew 15** and **Mark 7**. The Jews criticized Christ's disciples because they did not ceremonially wash their hands before eating. Christ's response to them is a scolding rebuke, "*Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.*" **Mark 7:9**

Apply:

Any religious tradition that glorifies you or is used to prove yourself "religious" in God's eyes is not worthy of the Gospel, and must be rejected. Why is this so? Because the flesh (Paul's term for our sin nature) can be both incredibly evil and also remarkably religious. The "Flesh" is manifested as both bad and good. There can be in the life of a man both selfishly evil deeds and he can dress up the flesh in religious robes like the Pharisees and murder the Son of God! It was this fleshly Judaism of the Pharisees who used their traditions as a means to work their way to heaven. This was the lifestyle of Rabbi Saul, who tells us that before he knew Christ as Savior and Lord, he was "*advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.*" **Gal 1:14**

Illustration: In Paul's letter to the Colossians Paul condemns those who seek to use traditions to gain favor with God. In **Colossians 2:16-23** he lists the many practices of those who use their religious new moons, worship of Angels, festivals & Sabbaths as means of the flesh justifying itself before God. All these traditions fail the motive test. Our Christian traditions should come out of the Gospel, advance the Gospel, and glorify Christ.

Question: What traditions are used today to gain favor with God, rather than to trust God's Grace-gift of salvation in Christ? All denominations contain the traditions of men that alter, distort or deny the Gospel. It is the task of the Biblical preacher/teacher to see this error and expose it, correct it, and apply the Gospel to it.

Summary of Guideline #3- each so-called Christian tradition must be evaluated as to its source (the Gospel) and its motive. If it distorts Grace, adds works, or denies the sole sufficiency of the Cross- we must reject it.

Guideline #4- Does the tradition promote, protect and defend the truth of the Gospel?

Explain; there are some traditions within the Church that appear on the surface to be Christian, but when looked at carefully they contain many elements of paganism.

Examples: Infant baptism; the worship of Mary, the doctrine of purgatory, teachings regarding blessings and curses, the modern day “prosperity gospel” and many other man-made church traditions will not stand the test of Biblical orthodoxy.

Illustration: The observance of December 25th as the day of Christ’s birth should be disputed, challenged, or even rejected. Its origins are rooted in the pagan holiday of Saturnalia, (the winter solstice), a week of drunkenness, rape and free rioting that climaxed on December 25th. It was not until the late 4th Century that John of Chrysostom declared December 25th the date of Christ’s birth. The two holidays were joined by the Roman church to attract pagans into the Church! For centuries orthodox believers knew this to be true and rejected practicing this pagan Christmas holiday. In America, the Puritans denounced Christmas as “non-Christian” and it was forbidden in many cities of New England for many years.

Apply: How successful would modern day denominations be if they rejected the pagan elements in Christmas? What would happen if the Elders in major denominations were to apply the criteria Jesus applied to Judaism? What if our Church leaders questioned the church traditions about Christmas? Just by questioning its SOURCE, it’s MOTIVE, its ADVANCEMENT of the Gospel or its self-serving elements- Christmas as we know it today will fail the test!

If any famous American pastor were to formally renounce Santa Claus as fable, declare Rudolph a myth, and tell our kids that reindeer do not fly, he will get his nose bloodied by the media. He dare not renounce Christmas!

Being realistic, it will never happen. Commercial America is too loud a voice. Christmas is big money for all who sell it as truth. What is remarkable about this is that the Christmas tradition in America began as a celebration of the Advent of the Christ-child. Not so today! Jesus is not invited to His own birthday party. Manger scenes are no longer welcomed in public places, government buildings, or elsewhere by our pluralistic society. “Season’s greetings” has replaced “Merry Christmas” in secular America. Perhaps the church has lost Christmas forever.

Summary of guideline #4 every church leader, bishop, and pastor must question each of his cultural traditions or denominational traditions in the light of these biblical guidelines. Most important of all is this principle- does the tradition promote, protect and advance the Gospel of Jesus Christ? If not, is he willing to oppose the tradition? Does he have the prophetic courage to challenge it?

Examples of African cultural traditions that come against the Gospel:

1. Practice of witchcraft, or the combining of witchcraft with the Christian faith.
2. Praying to one’s ancestors

3. Keeping and using amulets in the house
4. The male dominated culture in African tribes that does not willingly educate, advance or treat women with dignity.
5. Polygamy
6. Female circumcision
7. Some extreme Pentecostal practices like slaying in the spirit, & other practices need to be tested in the light of scripture.
8. Any and all church traditions that have come to Africa thru denominational teachings that are not Biblical, Apostolic and Christ honoring.

Conclusion:

- Let us remember that traditions are Not the Gospel but they can and should support the Gospel.
- Never do as the Jews did- elevate a tradition to the position of "law." Traditions serve the Gospel not the other way around.
- Accept the challenge to do as Jesus and the Apostles did- apply these guidelines to every tradition within the church or in the culture.