

Tradition

By Doug Hamilton

Part I) Defining Tradition

There is an intriguing account found in Matthew 15:1–9 concerning tradition. It says the following:

Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ² 'Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.' ³ And He answered and said to them, "Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ "For God said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.' ⁵ "But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God," ⁶ he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷ "You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: ⁸ 'This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me.' ⁹ 'But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' "

The Pharisees pressed Jesus concerning His disciples not keeping the "*tradition of the elders*". In particular it was the tradition of washing their hands prior to eating bread. Though washing your hands prior to eating is good for health, there was certainly not a specific command in the Law to wash hands prior to eating. Yet we find the Pharisees judging Jesus and the disciples for not adhering to it. They called it the "tradition of the elders", but Jesus said it was the "*tradition of men*" (Mark 7:8).

The definition of the word *Tradition* is *the collective wisdom of any given culture, the notions of its worldview, and the insights of its institutions.* ⁽¹⁾ What the Pharisees were attempting to force Jesus and the disciples to engage in was not something specifically commanded of God, but of man.

The term "tradition" comes from a noun that refers to something that has been "handed over" or "passed on" (*paradosis*). The "tradition of the elders" (15:1) became a technical expression among the Pharisees for the interpretation of Scripture made by past esteemed rabbis that was "passed on" to later generations....The traditions of the elders, therefore, came to refer to "rules of Jewish life and religion which in the course of centuries had come to possess a validity and sanctity equal to that of the Written Law and which, as the 'Oral Law,' were deemed, equally with the Written Law, to be of divine origin and therefore consonant with and, for the most part, deducible from the Written Law."

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If one were to search the writings of Moses, they would only find 613 works of the Law. It was from these commands that Jewish leaders began interpreting their application thereof. Through the centuries of passing down oral and written rules of application they ended up with tens of

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thousands of these “binding” traditions. By the time Jesus began His ministry, the spiritual leaders of Israel had completely perverted the words of God, forgetting the true spirit of the Law. He pointed this out in the remainder of the passage that they were being hypocrites in the command to honor their mothers and fathers.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus devoted three uninterrupted chapters of attack against these warped traditions which had taken over the Jewish system. He verbally ripped open the chest of a decaying religious corpse and revealed the beating heart of a living God.

- He showed that the sufferer for the sake of God in this life is truly blessed (Matthew 5:1-12).
- He taught the people that they were to be salt and light in a world which sought to silence the influence of God (Matthew 5:13-16).
- He communicated the importance to follow the spirit of the Law over the Pharisaical interpretations (Matthew 5:17-20).
- He emphasized if you have hate in your heart for a brother, then you are a spiritual murderer (Matthew 15:21-26).
- He said if you have lust in your heart for another, then you are a spiritual adulterer (Matthew 15:27-32).
- He declared if you prop up your words with false vows that you are a spiritual liar (Matthew 15:33-38).
- He taught mercy and forgiveness in the rules of retribution (Matthew 15:38-42).
- He clearly articulated to love your neighbor over a life of grudge-holding (Matthew 15:43-48).

The remaining two chapters of the sermon continued the same pattern, exposing the true intent of the Law of God. It was not there for man to make specific rules to obey and feel justified, but to convict all men as sinners. It was in that conviction which left only one conclusion: We have a heart God who deeply desires us to have a heart relationship with Him.

Where do traditions come from?

They have always been prevalent in the history of man. They go through a life-cycle like everything else associated with mankind. Traditions are born, adhered to, run their course and die. Their lifespan can last for a generation or continue on for centuries. Wherever man exists, whenever there is knowledge to be applied, there you will find traditions.

For example, in Matthew 5:13 it states, “*It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.*” The Bible scholar William Barclay said of this passage:

It remains to be noted that sometimes the early Church made a very strange use of this text. In the synagogue, among the Jews, there was a custom that if a Jew became an unbeliever and then returned to the faith, before he was received back

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into the synagogue he must in penitence lie across the door of the synagogue and invite people to trample upon him as they entered. In certain places the Christian Church took over that custom, and Christians who had been ejected by discipline from the church were compelled, before they were received back, to lie at the door of the church and to invite people as they entered: 'Trample upon me who am the salt which has lost its savour.' ⁽³⁾

It is important to understand that the early church was extremely persecuted. To leave the assembly and come back would have really cut at the heart of the faithful who were suffering greatly for the sake of the gospel. There was a sense of retributive punishment being applied when that was carried out. We should be very happy that this was a tradition which died out after a short time in the early church.

Good Traditions / Bad Traditions

This leads us to another point, there are good traditions and bad traditions. For example, there was a tradition of the pagans in Corinth two centuries prior to Paul's arrival.

Dominating Corinth stood the hill of the Acropolis. The hill was not only a fortress; it was a temple of Aphrodite. In its great days, the temple had 1,000 priestesses of Aphrodite who were sacred prostitutes and who, at evening, came down to the city streets to ply their trade. It had become a proverb: 'Not every man can afford a journey to Corinth.' ⁽⁴⁾

Even though the temple had long since been destroyed, the customs of worshipping their pagan gods through sexual immorality had persisted. They would honor their gods through participating in prostitution. Paul addressed this in 1 Corinthians 6:16, "*Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For He says, 'THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH.'*" He was attacking the adhered tradition which some of the Corinthian Christians to which the still clung. Paul wanted them to get rid of a bad tradition which ran contrary to the one true God.

He later wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:2, "*Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.*" He was reminding them of some of the good traditions for which they were carrying out God's word in their lives. There were acceptable practices for them to truly honor Christ, like marriage (chapter 7), not being a stumbling block to a brother (chapter 8), discipline (chapter 9 and 10), assembled worship (chapter 11) and love (chapter 13). These were good traditions with a good foundation.

Paul grew up being surrounded by the many Jewish traditions for which Jesus condemned. He said in Galatians 1:13-14, "*For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.*" His application of traditions handed down to him

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had actually led him away from God. He actually considered his obligation to destroy anyone who taught contrary to those same traditions (Acts 22:3). He was the extreme version of bad tradition.

After his conversion to Christ, he fought with the same fervency against the same traditions for which he was previously defended. It was a complete turnaround. Listen to him in the following two verses.

- Colossians 2:8, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.”
- 2 Thessalonians 3:6, “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.”

Paul had advances in the traditions of Christ. Jesus saves the sinner from his old traditions of the world and sets us on a transition from bad to good traditions for God. Christian living is the practice of changing our traditions in such a way. *Romans 12:1-2*, “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

When we are cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ, we are crucified to Him (Galatians 2:20) and are raised to walk in the newness of life (Romans 6:4).

- We used to have the personal tradition of drunkenness, but now we strive for sobriety.
- We used to have the tradition of lying to get what we want, but now we dwell in the truth.
- We used to hold to the tradition of rebellion, but now it has been replaced by a tradition of submission.
- We used to have the tradition of hate, but now we hold the tradition of love.

We are a changed people, not so that we may gain a relationship with Jesus, but that we can retain our relationship with the same. Jesus deeply desires to help us in our “tradition-transformation” if we will let him, but we must first be saved by His blood. He started the tradition of salvation which exists to this day. It is a ritual called baptism (Matthew 28:19-20). If we believe he is the Son of God, are repentant to our sins and willing to confess him before men, then we enter a covenant with Him. From there we fight a good fight to shed our old ways and put on the new. He gives us that choice, but will you take it?

In part 2 of the series, we will learn in more depth how to analyze and alter traditions. Being able to understand this process is key in adjusting to the time and culture.

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II) Analyzing and Altering Traditions

Some Traditions Die Hard

William Poteet wrote in *The Pentecostal Minister* how in 1903 the Russian Czar noticed a sentry posted for no apparent reason on the Kremlin grounds. Upon inquiry, he discovered that in 1776 Catherine the Great found there the first flower of spring. "Post a sentry here," she commanded, "so that no one tramples that flower under foot!" Some traditions die hard. ⁽⁵⁾

For more than a century after the flowers died a guard watched over some weeds. It had become a tradition with no meaning or purpose. Think about all the people who walked by that sentry not knowing the true meaning of his mission. There might have even been some guards who did not know why they were there.

We Must Question All Tradition

There is always the possibility to hold to a tradition for which we do not understand. That in itself makes it a meaningless tradition, leaving us with our own pharisaical law. We cannot base tradition in tradition, for that makes it worthless. We must always question traditions for which we are keeping. This is true for two reasons:

- 1) To make sure we understand the principle of the tradition.
Every good tradition must have a good principle behind it. If it does not, then it cannot be good.
- 2) To analyze these reasons and see if they are still applicable.
Some traditions may have started out good, but evolved into a bad tradition. If we are using a tradition which no longer serves a purpose, then we must do something about it.

The object of this lesson is not to shed our traditions, but to hold to the best traditions. We must be able to give an account of the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15). God expects us to be a people of reason (Isaiah 1:18) and to fall short in this area will only lead to spiritual trouble.

The Tradition of Reading Washington's Farewell Address

In 1983 a fifty-year-old tradition was quietly dropped by the U.S. House of Representatives. The tradition involved the annual reading of George Washington's farewell address on the occasion of his birthday. Democratic and Republican leaders decided it was useless to continue to read the lengthy address to a mostly empty chamber. "It's too bad," said GOP aide, "but it's time for this to be consigned to the dustbin."

Stated "The Calgary Herald": "In past years, it was almost holy writ that the address must be read. Through war and storm for half a century, a member of each chamber has been chosen to read the address." Declared the newspaper heading, "Nobody listens to Washington's farewell address."

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They set this up with good intentions in 1933 during the depression. It was a thrust to be more dependent on God in the midst of turmoil, but turmoil had ended. The politicians as a whole no longer cared about God and they ended the tradition.

Traditions of Christian Worship through the Eyes of an Ancient Heathen.

Pliny the Younger was a Roman author and administrator. He wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan in about 112, describing the early Christian worship traditions which had already been adopted:

They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to do any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind. ⁽⁶⁾

In this piece of history we are exposed to the traditions of the early church through the eyes of a pagan. Analysis of this reveals the following:

- They met on a certain day...we call this Sunday, the first day of the week.
- They sang hymns...these were songs to Christ as God.
- They pledged to live pure lives...this showed their intentions on making life changes for God.
- They partook of a food of an ordinary and innocent kind...we call this the Lord's Supper.

I mention this writing from outside the Bible only to shed a little light of the worship assembly of the early church as observed from the outside pagan world. Pliny the Younger actually had some good sources of information, for it parallels the New Testament. Let us look to the Bible for a concerning some workings of the assembled worship.

1) Tradition of Male Leadership in the Assembly.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:2, "*Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.*" Behind every tradition there is a principle and a means to carry out the principle. In the next verse (11:3), Paul revealed a biblical principle.

1 Corinthians 11:3, "But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ."

In any group of two there can only be one leader and one follower. This was established in the creation account of Adam and Eve. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 2:12-14 concerning the assembly of Christians, "*But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.* ¹³ *For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve.* ¹⁴ *And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.*" It was not the man nor the

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woman who decided leadership of the family, but God. The family is to be led by the man, who in turn is led by Christ. What evidence did Paul offer? Traditional and Biological.

a) Traditional

Paul continued his dialogue about marriage and the male leadership expected in marriage. He said in verse 10, *“Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.”* The sign of marriage in that day was the wearing of a veil or distinctive hair style, as a ring is today...And because the unveiling would look like a sexual come-on, it was improper to do this in a church attended by the holy angels (11:10). ⁽⁷⁾

Paul came from the conservative area of Tarsus and a conservative training at the feet of Gamaliel in the conservative town of Jerusalem. He was very traditional. He was offering a conservative truth of a conservative tradition. This is only the first part of his argument.

b) Biological

Paul said in verses 14-15, *“Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him,¹⁵ but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering.”* Notice that Paul was not referring to chest hair, but hair on the head. This is something which is just as true today as it was back then. It is the biology of the sexes coming into play. “As we understand by it here to denote the natural constitution of the sexes, and the richer growth of hair in the woman.” ⁽⁸⁾

Women by nature have thicker and longer hair. They have chemistry which God designed in the DNA to grow hair on the head at a greater proportion to the men. In the way that Paul used biology for male leadership in the assembly in 1 Timothy 2:12-14, he does so here again. It is through the determination of the sex by God that leadership in the assembly is arranged, not by social whims of the day.

I have run into some in and out of the church who have said that we are misogynistic because we are not getting with the times of the modern culture. I knew a former Christian of the Lord's body who actually left Christ for the alien doctrine of modern pagans. She felt that it was okay to have women leaders in the assembly, including the elders, deacons and preachers. What was her reasoning for this? That male leadership was only a tradition. She failed to see that it was sound to the scriptures and timeless for the life of the church. She not only adopted a “transgender worldview” where sexes are relative, but actually led her whole family astray from God.

2) Tradition of the Lord's Supper

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, *For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread;²⁴ and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”²⁵ In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.*

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Once again, he was referring to the assembly. They were to partake of the Lord's Supper when they assemble on the "*first day of the week*" (16:2). This was the tradition which Jesus inaugurated Himself (Matthew 26:26-28) on the night of the Passover. It is a weekly group commemoration of His death, burial and resurrection from the grave. It is a good tradition with meaning rooted in the core of Christianity. This is why we have it today. It was started by Christ for the people of Christ.

If a Christian is partaking of the Lord's Supper and knows not the reason for which they do, then they should not take it until further education. It has to have meaning to be of value. If we are just going through the motions, but not engaging the importance of the tradition, we eat and drink to our own damnation (1 Corinthians 11:29).

3) Tradition of Acapella Music

Paul discussed this in Ephesians 5:15-21. He was speaking to converts who came out of a very pagan background.

“Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise,¹⁶ making the most of your time, because the days are evil.¹⁷ So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit,¹⁹ speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord;²⁰ always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father;²¹ and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.”

The pagans of Paul's day held to a tradition surrounding their drinking. Wine and drunkenness were central features of the worship of Dionysus (also known as Bacchus). In the frenzied and ecstatic Dionysiac rituals, intoxication with wine was tantamount to being filled with the spirit of Dionysus. It is therefore conceivable that some of the new believers in Asia Minor were carrying this form of worship with them into the church by associating wine with the filling of the Holy Spirit.⁽⁸⁾

They were to put away their old tradition to be drunk with the spirit of Dionysius and instead be filled with the Holy Spirit. It was not through the tradition of alcohol consumption, but through musical encouragement. It not just any music, but that which was through singing and making melody in their hearts to God. The word Paul used for *making melody* is *psallo*, which means to pluck the heart strings. That is how we are filled with the Spirit. We are to *Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God (Colossians 3:16).*

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It was not until six centuries later that the pagans started the tradition of bringing their instruments to the worship assembly. This is an example of a good tradition being replaced by a bad one.

There are many today who have no problem with manmade instruments being brought in to assist God made heart instruments. They are confusing the two as being the same.

They excuse it by saying, "Our voices need a piano to make it sound better." My question back to them is, "Are you not plucking your heart strings that God made and intended?"

Do you not understand that God loves the singing of the sincere Christian no matter what man says?" We must be so careful that we do not follow the traditions of men.

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