

Traditions or Traditionalism?

A church can live—or die—by tradition. Some church traditions are good and helpful: meeting at a certain time, familiar music, or holiday observances. These can build a family spirit and create a comfortable culture. However, traditions can sometimes be harmful.

A tradition is a custom or habit that becomes part of the expected church culture, for good or for bad. *Traditionalism*, however, is valuing traditions as unwritten laws which are over, above, and therefore against the Word of God. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees who held to many traditions which conflicted with God's direct commands. For example, He condemned the practice called "Corban" in which a person could dedicate their goods to the temple (i.e. for God's use), but then deny help to their own parents for that very reason saying that their goods and finances were Corban and thus unavailable. This, of course, was contrary to the fourth commandment to honor one's parents. "You reject the commandment of God that you may keep your tradition," Jesus told the Pharisees (see Mark 7:1-23; cf. Matt. 15:1-20).

Using the account in Mark 7 we see will why Jesus considered traditionalism harmful. We will also list some proper attitudes toward traditions.

Dangers of Traditionalism

Jesus indicated several dangers that come from traditionalism:

1. Traditionalism can breed hypocrisy (7:6-7). When certain traditions become so familiar that the reason behind them is forgotten, then actions can become perfunctory and give the impression of spirituality. Hymns can be sung without heart, prayers predictable, and rituals routine. Though a person might impress others as spiritual because of his practices, the outward doing does not reflect the inner motive or desire. A person can be far from God, while feigning godliness by conforming to tradition. That is hypocrisy.

2. Traditionalism can nullify the Word of God (7:8-13). This happens when a tradition supplants obedience to a clear command or principle in the Bible. The practice of Corban illustrates this danger. A modern day example might be the worship of Mary, which became official Catholic church practice in A.D. 432, but contradicts the commandment against worshiping anyone but God. Some Protestant churches have apparently placed certain traditions on the same level as God's commands by insistence on things like a particular translation of the Bible, hymns only (or contemporary music only!), an "altar call" (or none), issues of frequency and practice of the Lord's Supper, or the use or non-use of musical instruments (the organ versus drums, for example).

3. Traditionalism produces and promotes a false spirituality (7:14-23). People may genuinely feel that they are more spiritual or closer to God because of a ritual or tradition. But Jesus taught that it was not things external that defile us or make us closer to God, it is things internal. Organ music in an America church does not bring someone closer to God than crude drums under a tree in Africa. Neither can the kind of bread we use in the Lord's Supper (or wine, or juice, or cup, or cuplets). Praying with raised hands does not make one a super-Christian. The issue in all these things is the motive and desire of the heart. But traditionalism can easily ignore the heart and depend on external practices to give one the feeling of spirituality.

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Proper Attitudes toward Traditions

As said, traditions can be good. It depends on our attitude toward them and toward those who might disagree or have different traditions. Here are some suggestions for a healthy attitude toward traditions.

1. Give freedom where the Bible is silent. The Bible speaks to many things which should be followed scrupulously, but it also ignores many issues. For example, it says nothing about how many times a week a church should meet or the time of day. And while the Old Testament mentions many musical instruments for worship, the New Testament mentions none. If there is no clear command about these things in the Bible, then we have the freedom to meet whenever and use whatever instruments help us in our worship. The Bible is also silent about neckties, pulpits, hymnbooks, powerpoint, passing a collection plate, and walking the aisle. If the Bible does not speak to the issue, churches should feel free to do whatever enhances their worship and relationship to God.

2. Don't become proud of traditions. Since they don't commend us to God and may even keep us from God, why should we be proud? We can learn to appreciate the traditions of other people, churches, and denominations if we learn their reasons and if they are sincerely following God's Word, not changing it. We can also learn to hold our traditions more loosely if it benefits others to change them.

3. Realize God is a God of Change. Though God never changes, His ways certainly do. Much of God's promises are for new things: a new birth, new heart, new song, new Spirit, New Covenant, new heavens and earth, etc. Someone who likes things to stay the same could be terribly uncomfortable in heaven! Every tradition was new at one point, so don't be afraid to start a new tradition. Be open to new ways of doing things. Churches used to use chalkboards, then came overhead projectors, now many use computerized powerpoint presentations (What's next, 3-D holograms?). Society, culture, and people change; so must the ways we use to reach them.

4. Make sure your traditions are relevant. Traditions are good if they help people understand God's truth and grow in it. But this is unlikely to happen through outdated and irrelevant means. For example, how many people still relate to "bringing in the sheaves" as a metaphor for evangelism? We should seek the most relevant metaphors for our particular culture. When we ourselves change or we forget the reasons for a tradition, they easily become irrelevant.

Conclusion

Some traditions are good and some are harmful, but we should always avoid the proud spirit of traditionalism which exalts man's customs over God's Word. If we are honest in our evaluation we might find that many of the church's sacred cows better serve us as holy hamburgers. The area of keeping traditions and respecting the traditions of others is a good opportunity to show grace and acceptance to others who have different practices and backgrounds. After all, it is grace that saves us, not traditions.