

# The traditions of men vs. apostolic tradition

## Introduction

‘Tradition’ is the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation. This stems from a Latin word *tradere* meaning ‘deliver’. In general we could replace the word ‘traditions’ with ‘customs’ or ‘conventions’.

In some church circles passed down traditions are held in esteem while in others they are denigrated. Thus some Christians uphold traditions that have no Biblical warrant and stimulate legalism, while other Christians deny all traditions as legalism and fail to obey Biblical commands.

For a simple example, some conservative believers have a tradition that going to the movies is evil and so they demand obedience to this principle. This is a tradition of men that has no warrant.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, other believers say that any tradition is evil and legalism, therefore they do not teach that believers should give formal thanks before a meal. This is sin.

It behoves us then to look into the subject of traditions and try to understand the good and the bad. If we don’t do this, how can we know what is right behaviour?

## Apostolic tradition

**Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle. 1 Cor 11:2**

**Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle. 2 Thess 2:15**

**But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us. 2 Thess 3:6**

‘Traditions’ in these examples is the Greek word *paradosis*, which essentially means ‘a giving over’ and thus refers to the giving over of instruction or precept, either orally or in writing. Thus it is a teaching delivered; i.e. tradition or a body of precepts.

That the apostles laid down traditions when they established new churches is without doubt; they openly say so. This was in the period before the NT had been written and the apostles wanted to establish new believers in good habits; thus they taught them, face to face, certain traditions to help new converts know how to live a godly life.

Over time, as the apostles wrote letters to churches reminding them of truths they needed to understand better, a previous oral tradition would be laid down in writing in a letter. Thus certain traditions eventually became Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> I am not advocating that it is safe to watch all movies; in fact, movies are often a source of wickedness and temptation; but we cannot say that movies as a principle are evil in themselves; indeed, some movies have been effectively used as an evangelistic witness.

### Oral tradition

Now there is a school of thought, in some denominational churches, that the apostles instituted certain oral traditions that were never laid down in a letter as Scripture. These supposed principles were passed down through the generations orally for centuries and have become firm extra-Biblical doctrines.

The Pharisees were the prime examples of this tradition and were severely condemned by the Lord for this behaviour. The oral traditions of the Pharisees, supposedly passed down from Moses and never written down, eventually became a means of denying the written Scriptures. The Lord Jesus repeatedly attacked the Pharisees for this. Over time, the Pharisaic oral traditions became the Babylonian Talmud that is the authoritative commands for modern Jews and this work is blasphemous in the extreme. What supposedly began as a commentary by Moses ended up, through the traditions of men, into a truly satanic document which reverses the Mosaic Law.<sup>2</sup>

A modern 'Christian' example is the importance of papal tradition within the Roman Church. This contains many unscriptural doctrines that are claimed to be handed down by apostolic succession through the popes that were infallible in their pronouncements.

We must strongly affirm that no oral tradition is of any authority in the church whatsoever, unless it is supported by Scripture; either in clear command or by necessary deduction. The Bible alone is the source of the believer's authority:

But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2  
Tim 3:14-17

Here Paul tells us that God's word alone gives us what we need for every good work. There is no necessary good work that is only supported by oral tradition. Thus oral traditions (for example using a rosary for prayer discipline) have no substance at all.

### Deductions

There are apostolic traditions that can be ascertained by careful study of the Bible, however, some of these do not have a specific clear command in any NT letter; hence the confusion. A good disciple will study the Scriptures carefully and come to clarity on this; it is only superficial believers who do not study God's word that deny certain traditions. For example:

#### *Giving thanks for a meal*

There should be no confusion about this since giving thanks is certainly a good thing. How can giving thanks to God ever be wrong?

Firstly, we are told to be constant in giving thanks:

Giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Eph  
5:20

In everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving. Phil 4:6

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<sup>2</sup> I say document, but the Talmud is a huge multi-volume series of rabbinic comment.

And *whatever* you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. Col 3:17

In everything give thanks. 1 Thess 5:18

Secondly, we have the passing comment by Paul that giving thanks for food is an apostolic practice:

[False teachers who are] *commanding* to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God *is* good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer. If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ. 1 Tim 4:3-6

Here we have Paul centring on the heresies of false teachers who commanded vegetarianism. In dealing with these errors, Paul happens to mention that eating meat is acceptable when it is received with thanksgiving. In fact Paul adds that 'God created [meat] to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth'. A by-product of Paul's teaching about heretics is instruction about giving thanks for food. Thus we know that giving thanks for food was a tradition of Paul.

Thirdly, we have the instruction gained from OT traditions that set certain ethical precedents for us. For example:

God said, 'See, I have given you every herb *that* yields seed which *is* on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food'. Gen 1:29

This establishes that the food we have on the earth is a gift from God. If food is a gift from God then we should give thanks to God for it. [Before the fall, man and carnivorous animals were vegetarian.]

Here is what I have seen: *It is* good and fitting *for one* to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it *is* his heritage. As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labour -- this *is* the gift of God. Eccles 5:18-19

Here also is a clear Scripture stating that our food is a gift of God. Thus food needs to be received with thanksgiving.

So, by a series of deductions based on firm Biblical texts, we can safely say that the tradition of giving thanks for a meal is a godly thing; it is a tradition to be observed.

### *Quiet-times*

This is just a modern phrase for daily devotions. The tradition is that there should be a period of time (no Biblical time limit is set) when the believer should spend time alone with God (no Biblical time-frame is set) praying and reading the Bible (no specific actions are set). Usually morning devotions are commended before breakfast or soon afterwards. The period is often recommend as a minimum of 15 minutes to an unlimited maximum.

There is no specific verse in the Bible where we are commanded to perform our devotions in a set way, for a set time, at a certain time of the day. Those who turn to David and insist that there are set times fail to see that:

- This is an Old Covenant period where devotions were very formal and no man had the Spirit of God permanently indwelling him. Furthermore, devotions included certain legalistic matters such as praying towards the temple (2 Chron 6:34, 38) and prayers required an offering to ensure purity to be heard.

- David's practice was performing devotions three times a day and sometimes all night (Ps 55:17). Are we to prescribe that?

Jesus' example shows flexibility. He often prayed early in the morning and sometimes through the night. Sometimes he went away for a season alone to pray constantly. At other times he prayed in the evening. In reality Jesus was praying all the time but we are allowed to see certain periods where his prayer was verbal and concentrated.

Initially, the apostles followed the Jewish practice of praying formally in the afternoon at the time of the evening sacrifice (Acts 3:1, 9<sup>th</sup> hour = 3pm). The Jewish times of prayer were the third, sixth and ninth hours (9am, noon and 3pm).

For New Covenant believers there are no set demands; believers should pray as the Spirit within them leads. However, Biblical precedent shows that a person should discipline themselves to, study, pray, meditate and give thanks daily, with flexibility to do more for longer as the Spirit leads. There is no precedent for a true believer completely ignoring daily prayer and Bible reading, yet many modern Christians behave in this manner.

Biblical precedents include:

- Jesus modelled assiduous and steadfast prayer and knew the Scriptures well.
- All godly saints, from cover to cover in the Bible, regularly and daily prayed to God and studied his word in the form that they had available to them. They also meditated on God's word and gave constant thanks.
- There are repeated commands in God's word to read Scripture and pray.

So, while there is no NT command to pray and read Scripture at x o'clock for x minutes, it is clear that this daily discipline is required. There is also no specific form prescribed, though common sense tells you that reading Scripture first, considering its implications and then praying accordingly is a good thing to do.

On top of all this evidence, the Lord himself taught the disciples to pray according to certain headings, which we call The Lord's Prayer. This was evidently a format designed for daily devotions. As Jews, the disciples would have prayed three times a day at formal hours of prayer.

So, we can safely say that the principle of Quiet-times (although not a Biblical term) is a good tradition based upon Biblical principles.

### **Other examples of apostolic tradition**

*Head covering and the submission of women in the church*

But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor *do* the churches of God. Now in giving these instructions ... 1 Cor 11:16-17

This is a clear apostolic tradition that has entered the text of Scripture.

Paul's teaching in the earlier verses is that women are subordinate to men in the church meeting (so they cannot lead for example) and must wear a head covering to hide their glory as women as a sign of this submission. As the church is the gathering of the new man in Christ, earthly distinctions must be avoided, and this includes the glory of women seen in their distinctive beauty and glory (which in those days was chiefly in long hair).

Paul makes it clear that this is a tradition he taught to all the churches of God; it was an 'instruction' (literally, 'command' or 'charge').

*Marriage and singleness*

But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches. 1 Cor 7:17

Without going into a detailed analysis of Paul's teaching on marriage and divorce, what we can safely say is that Paul had clear traditions on this; he gave instructions he expected the church to follow. In fact he 'ordained' ['appoint' or 'prescribe'] these principles for the churches.

*Giving*

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also. 1 Cor 16:1

Most of Paul's teaching about giving is gained from his examples, such as in his requests to churches to support those suffering from famine. We don't have NT verses categorically telling us to give x% of our income to this or that thing every week or every month [don't let any man fool you in this].<sup>3</sup>

Yet we do have specific instructions given to specific churches and disciples that teach us the following:

- Most of the church's giving is to the poor and needy and certainly not for the upkeep of a big building (1 Cor 16:1-3; 2 Cor 9:1-12; Gal 2:10).
- Giving is to be sacrificial and with good grace (Mk 12:42-44).
- Giving is to be by regular putting away in some form, as one is able (1 Cor 16:2; 2 Cor 9:7). There is no heavy demand on poor people (which is what a tithe is).
- The apostles do not command a specific tithe. The word 'tithe' is not even mentioned in the NT, apart from two verses regarding the tithes of Pharisees, which are condemned.

**Conclusion**

These are sufficient examples to show us that there were specific traditions laid down by the apostles which may not be categorically defined in Bible verses as a command but can be deduced from proper Bible study and apostolic precedent.

There are apostolic traditions that should be obeyed.

**Traditions of men**

Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? ... You have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Matt 15:3, 6

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<sup>3</sup> The usual Charismatic argument is that Mal 3:8-10 teaches that church members give a tithe (10% of income) to the church storehouse (i.e. leadership) for use as they want. This is nonsense. 1) This is an Old Covenant institution which has no corresponding NT corroboration. Giving in the NT can be much more than the tithe or much less, depending upon circumstances. The main example offered is the widow's mites, much less than a tithe. 2) Malachi is talking about tithes AND OFFERINGS under the Old Covenant system. This does not apply today. 3) Failure to tithe and give offerings was cursed; but Christians are not under any curse and God does not curse his own children. 4) In Malachi's day the tithe was not money but a tithe of flocks, herds, and produce. 5) The storehouse was the food store for the Levites and priests; this does not equate to a modern church treasurer. Furthermore, this represented Israel's income tax; modern tithes are a burden above income tax and other taxes. New Covenant believers are to give sacrificially as God leads and to give mainly to the poor. Covenanted tithing stops believers being able to choose what God wants them to give to; thus tithes to a church leader could be sin of God wants you to give to the local poor.

Laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men -- the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do. ... Making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. Mk 7:8, 13

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. Col 2:8

We have already mentioned the traditions of men found in the Pharisees, modern Jewish religion and institutional denominations. Here I want to give some examples of human traditions having unnecessary authority over people in evangelical churches. For clarity, these are regulations or conventions made by men that have no Scriptural authority.

### **Charismatic authoritarianism**

I have explained this in many previous works. Radical Charismatic churches, such as Restorationist and New Churches plus the more modern apostolic and prophetic movements (e.g New Apostolic Reformation) and other historic groups (such as the Shepherding Movement) all had principles that were authoritarian and sometimes even despotic.

These churches were based upon a pyramidal hierarchy (a demonic structure) whereby certain men with great titles (such as ‘apostle’ or ‘prophet’) were supposed to have a direct line to heaven and then impart direction to lesser mortals through layers of church leadership. This is about as deluded as one can get and it is the basis of cultism.

Thus an ‘apostle’, for example, gives instructions (that equate to implicit commands) that have no basis in Scripture whatsoever. Church members were expected to do this or that just because the ‘apostle’ said so. These instructions covered many aspects of church life, and often had a direct impact on a person’s home life, either directly or indirectly.

Thus meetings were established with no Biblical basis, such as men’s meetings, spiritual mapping cells,<sup>4</sup> healing meetings, ecumenical celebrations, large unified central meetings, and so on. These are a human tradition and not a Biblical instruction. Another example is the apostolic demand for lots of money so that he can go and buy a large building in the town to authenticate his ministry. Buying such a building has no Biblical warrant as Biblical churches meet in homes.

We could make a long list of examples of Charismatic authoritarian traditions but this will suffice. The commands of elitist men have no authority whatsoever unless they are fully based upon God’s word.

### **Charismatic worship**

Interestingly, Charismatic worship is completely based upon Old Covenant forms and transported into modern settings. This fails to understand the spiritual nature of the church’s worship and establishes human customs instead.

For example, Charismatic worship is heavily dependent upon loud music by an accompanying rock band. NT worship has no instrumental music whatsoever (check and see for yourself); the whole point of Christian praise is sung harmonies emanating from the heart and enjoined with simplicity in fellowship. It is the fruit of the lips that forms the sacrifice of praise and no apostle ever used musicians (neither did other church leaders for hundreds of years).

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<sup>4</sup> Whose specific purpose was to identify local demons.

The format found in Charismatic churches of many musicians, backing singers, choirs and so forth is completely Old Covenant; it has no apostolic authority whatsoever and no NT precedent. The whole system established by David was Old Covenant, prior to the gift of the outpoured Spirit, and temporary. There were no musicians around when the patriarchs worshipped and there were none in apostolic times. Musicians and choirs operated for a relatively short period as a symbol of various things. They were shadows and types not to be copied now.

So when all these components are seen in Charismatic churches, all of it is human tradition with no Biblical warrant.

### **Modern evangelistic practices**

We could make a long list of the traditions of men found in mission activity; for example: altar calls, decisionism, raising a hand or standing up at a meeting to be converted, repeating a dictated prayer.

All of these are traditions established by men that have no Biblical basis.

### **Jewish Root traditions**

Jewish Root groups and Messianic Churches have adopted the Old Covenant traditions of Israel and made them a sacrament. For example, celebrating feasts, such as Passover. In the worst cases they celebrate unbiblical Jewish traditions, such as Purim or Jewish folk dancing.

These are all human traditions based on error. OT festal days have been rescinded by the New Covenant. They were types and shadows, fulfilled by Christ - the reality of what they symbolised.

In extreme cases, some Messianic groups have adopted pagan ideas, such as reading the Kabbalah, which is Jewish mysticism and occult.

### **Conservative traditions**

Human conventions are not just found in heretical church movements but are seen everywhere people gather together. Unless one radically determines to follow Biblical teachings human tradition will certainly follow. Sadly, many otherwise sound churches are riddled with tradition.

### *Reformed Old Covenant religion*

Many Reformed leaders, steeped in Covenant Theology, fail to understand the importance and distinction of the New Covenant and they establish Mosaic Law as the standard of Christian ethics.

This failure to understand that the Mosaic Law was temporary and ended with the coming of Jesus is the cause of many evils. New Covenant believers are not without law or anti-law but understand that the Holy Spirit empowers them, both to understand God's laws and practice them. The central point is the putting on of the new man in Christ and being filled with the Spirit so that moral obedience arises from inward grace rather than external observance.

One example of the outcome of this is the idea that Sunday is a Sabbath and must be treated as an Old Covenant institution; indeed, the very notion of a 'Sunday Sabbath' is an oxymoron. This fails to understand the typology of the Sabbath being fulfilled in the rest of God in Christ. In fact many of the traditions present in Reformed churches fail to see

spiritual applications and relegate them to human practices; thus many church practices copy Old Covenant institutions.

The product of Old Covenant practice is legalism.

#### *Formal titles for leaders*

Conservative churches that boast that they are Biblical are often guilty of many practices that have no Scriptural authority whatsoever. One of these traditions is to give a special title to one church leader and convey on him far too much authority.

Examples of false formal title given to conservative leaders are: pastor (senior pastor, associate pastor), reverend, minister, superintendent, clergy, moderator, chaplain, a 'ruling elder' that does not teach, and so on.

#### *Voting for a leader*

The whole process of getting a leader is flawed and unscriptural. Usually, preachers are invited to come and preach and are then tested on how well they performed, eventually a shortlist is drawn up of the best preachers and the membership is asked to vote for their favourite, who becomes 'pastor'. Not a shred of this is Biblical.

In the NT we see God raise up leaders from within the new congregation over time. When Paul went back to strengthen new churches after some months, he was already able to confirm elders as leaders.

#### *Unbiblical meetings*

Again we could make a long catalogue of meetings that arose from a human tradition that have no basis in the Bible. For example: harvest festival, church boards, fundraisers, raffles, gift shops in churches, baptism services<sup>5</sup> and so on.

#### *Formal liturgy*

Doing exactly the same thing every week (e.g. opening prayer, notices, a few hymns, a Bible reading, a sermon, closing prayer). This common format is a human tradition. There is no such format in the NT.

#### *Sermon*

The NT gives no indication that the local church meetings are comprised of a formal worship time followed by a half-hour sermon always given by the same man, often from a pulpit.

Apostolic churches were informal and based upon many personal contributions according to gifting. Teaching was by several people and supervised by elders (who were always a teacher). There was no such thing as a prepared sermon. The main principle was mutual edification.

#### *Seasons*

Church seasons are all human traditions. Thus, Christmas, Easter, Lent, Whitsuntide, Advent, Epiphany etc are all unbiblical.

#### *Sunday school*

This is a human tradition based upon pragmatics forced by formal meetings in a building. The formal gathering requires noisy children and infants to be removed.

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<sup>5</sup> No NT baptism ever occurred in a church meeting.



This is the opposite of the ethics of gathering together, which is as a Christian family. When meetings are in a house and involve small numbers, it is possible to cope with children, who ought to be encouraged to participate as and when they can.

## **Concise examples of man's tradition**

### **Meetings**

- Gathering on Sunday at two meetings, one at 10am and one at 6.30pm. The NT only shows one meeting on the Lord's day usually in the evening, sometimes continuing late. Early church history also shows some meetings at dawn since slaves had no other free time.
- Meetings without the Lord's Supper. Apostolic churches always broke bread.
- Ecumenical meetings. Contrary to NT teaching.
- Common meeting types (harvest festival, church boards, baptism services etc.). Unbiblical.
- Sunday school. No such thing in the NT.

### **Meeting places**

- Having a dedicated church building. There was no such thing in the NT.
- Pews. Unbiblical. The very idea denies the importance of Biblical fellowship, looking at each other's faces.

### **Practices within meetings**

- Using little glasses with one sip of wine or fruit juice. The NT symbolism requires one cup of wine.
- Formal sermon. Unbiblical. Preaching was used as an evangelistic method but not for instructing the church. Teaching, was didactic instruction that was unprepared, informal and involved dialogue.
- Introducing occult and pagan practices into the church. Sheer heresy.
- Tongue speaking as gibberish. Never happened; tongues were unlearned human languages.
- Altar calls and decisionism. Unbiblical.

### **Worship issues**

- Formal liturgy. Didn't exist in the early church.
- Female worship leaders. Not allowed to happen in apostolic churches.
- Musical instruments dominate worship. No musical instruments in the early church.

### **Other practices**

- Broadcasting church meetings on television. Not possible in NT times and contrary to apostolic ethics.
- Asking the public for money. Sinful.
- Church seasons (Easter, Lent etc.). Unbiblical.
- Advertising special meetings in the world. Never happened and the idea is contrary to apostolic teaching.

### Leadership issues

- Having one man lead from a platform or pulpit, performing most of the tasks in the service. Never happened in the early church. Meetings were in a home and sermons did not dominate the meeting.
- The preacher greets everybody one by one as they leave the meeting. Never happened in the early church and not necessary since the meeting was based upon fellowship in a home.
- A worship leader leads half of the meeting. No such thing in the early church. Worship was impromptu and not led, though elders supervised the whole meeting to ensure good order.
- Deacons leading churches. Only elders led churches; deacons were servants to assist elders with practical matters such as distribution to the poor.
- Keeping the sins of leaders quiet. It has been very common for modern churches to keep the sins of leaders as quiet and discreet as possible; even making excuses to explain why a certain leader is on sabbatical. This is a modern tradition, but it is entirely unscriptural. The apostolic command is that the sins of leaders must be exposed to everybody, so that all will fear.<sup>6</sup>
- Formal titles for church leaders. Do not exist in the NT; however, some terms were used informally, such as: elder, shepherd (pastor), leader, or bishop (overseer). These were used for descriptive purposes and not to demonstrate formal authority over others.
- Voting in a leader. Unbiblical.
- Vestments. These are Old Covenant and now rescinded. Leaders are not meant to highlight an elevation above ordinary mortals.

### Money

- Giving is to men, usually church leaders or treasurers. Giving was as God directed, mostly to the poor sometimes directly to an itinerant leader, ad hoc.
- Salaries to leaders. Never existed in the NT.
- Using gift aid to recover tax. Never happened and the idea is contrary to apostolic ethics.

### Doctrinal

- The doctrine of the baptism in the Spirit as a mystical, 'second blessing' experience. Heresy. The once for all baptism in the Spirit is the baptism of all the elect into Christ as one body in the Spirit.
- Heresies. We could make a long list of doctrinal errors and false teachings but that is not necessary. All false ideas emanate from a man and then become a tradition.

## Conclusion

The modern church errs in two ways.

There are many churches that repudiate good traditions that are based on God's word, dismissing them as legalism, such as Quiet-Times and giving thanks for a meal. These are sins of omission.

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Tim 5:19-20, 'Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear'.

There are other churches that deny Biblical instructions and add the traditions of men to church ordinances to be obeyed. These are sins of commission. Any modern church practice that has no basis in Scripture is a tradition of men.

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