

The Truth about Tradition

Dub McClish

Introduction

Is everything that we call “tradition” bad, dangerous, or even prohibited? Is there such a thing as “good” or even “mandatory” tradition? This word occurs thirteen times in the New Testament (ASV), and we still frequently employ it in religious discussions. Since it is often misunderstood, it is worthy of our attention.

Tradition translates the Greek word *paradosis*, meaning “a handing down or on” (*Vine’s*). In common parlance we use the term to indicate a religious teaching or practice that has been handed down or passed on to us by others. *Tradition* is an innately neutral term, not connoting on its own either right or wrong, Truth or error. It takes on a definite negative or positive character only as indicated by its context. Inspiration uses it in both negative and positive connotations:

1. Negative traditions include practices that: (a) men bind as obligatory when they are not, and (b) are innately wrong
2. Positive traditions include practices that are either: (a) optional or (b) obligatory

Negative Traditions

By far the most frequent occurrence of *tradition* in the New Testament refers to the uninspired teachings the Jewish elders had added to their law (9 times). The scribes and Pharisees so used the term twice (Mat. 15:2; Mark 7:5), Mark commented on these traditions once (7:3), Jesus referred to them five times (Mat. 15:3, 6; Mark 7:8–9, 13), and Paul mentioned them once (Gal. 1:14). Additionally, Paul wrote once of the “traditions of men” in general (Col. 2:8). The foregoing are condemned and forbidden.

Jesus specifically rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for two of their traditions:

First, they apparently believed in washing everything – hands, bodies, cups, pots, brazen vessels, and tables (KJV) (Mark 7:3–4). Those who neglected such washings were “unclean,” “defiled” (Mat. 15:20). To those fanatics, outward “cleanliness was not merely **next** to godliness”; it practically **was** godliness.

The washings traditions were allowable, but Jesus condemned them because the Jewish elders bound them as law. There is no indication that Jesus rebuked the Jewish leaders for their cleanliness as such. Their washings were innocent and optional and may have even promoted

hygiene. In Moses' Law, God required certain washings (e.g., Lev. 15:5-27; 17:15-16; Num.19:11-22; et al.), but the "traditions of the elders" went far beyond these.

Jesus chastised them regarding their traditional washings on the following grounds:

1. They made these washings as binding as those of the Law itself and condemned those who did not keep them (Mat. 15:2). They were thereby "teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men" (v. 9).
2. They revered these washings above the requirements of the Law (specifically, that of the responsibility to honor their parents [Mat. 15:3-4]).
3. The nature of this tradition also rendered it evil. As described by Isaiah (and other prophets [e.g., Joel 2:13; Mic. 6:6-8; Eze. 33:31]), Judaism had degenerated – long before Jesus' time – into a religion that was all mouth and no heart – wholly external and ritualistic (Mat. 15:7-9; Mark 7:6). Such lack of involvement of their spirits and hearts in their religious practice, even when following the letter of the Law, rendered their worship vain.

In this same context, Jesus further emphasized the necessary involvement of the heart – particularly the obligation to keep it pure – in true religion:

For out of the heart come forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, railings: these are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not the man (Mat. 15:19-20).

Jesus had already, in the Sermon on the Mount, rebuked the pretended piety these traditional washings evinced. He verbally scourged those who gave alms, prayed, and fasted in public places to attract the praise of men (Mat. 6:1-18). Likewise, His final sermon stridently exposed the superficial elements to which they meticulously attended, while totally ignoring their own inward corruption (Mat. 23:25-28).

Second, they practiced a tradition called "Corban" (from the Heb. word *qorban*, offering [Lev. 1:2-3, et al.]). The scribes and Pharisees allowed people to "verbally dedicate" money to God and thereby evade their responsibility to support their aged parents (Mat. 15:4-6; Mark 7:11-12). However, the "donors" were allowed to have continued use of the "virtual donation."

The Corban tradition was unconditionally prohibited. The Lord did not rebuke the Jewish leaders for allowing men to bring offerings to the temple. The Mosaic system obligated the Jews to make offerings of various types (viz., sin, burnt, peace, wave, and free-will) that involved their livestock, produce, and money. However, the Corban tradition was far removed from these God-ordained offerings.

Jesus did not rebuke the scribes and Pharisees for binding the Corban tradition as obligatory as with the washings; there is no indication that they did so. Also, unlike the

washings, this tradition was not innocent or allowable under any circumstances. Rather, Jesus' rebuke of Corban stemmed from the following:

1. It was innately evil because it was a substitute for and was in conflict with God's Law that required children to honor their parents (Mat. 15:3-4; Mark 7:10). Therefore, Jesus unconditionally condemned it.
2. The Jews elevated this tradition above the Law and thereby set aside the Law concerning parental honor. They thereby "transgressed the commandment of God," "made void the word of God," "left the commandment of God," and "rejected the commandment of God" (Mat. 15:3, 6; Mark 7:8-9).
3. This practice was merciless and cruel, causing helpless parents to suffer severe hardship.
4. The behavior of these tradition-binding Jewish leaders was grossly hypocritical (Mat. 15:7; cf. 23:23-28; Mark 7:6). In their Corban scheme they were absolutely unconcerned about their helpless parents (and God's law concerning their care), but they were gravely concerned about their frivolous washings. Their behavior was a prime exhibit of straining out the gnat and swallowing the camel (Mat. 23:24; cf. Luke 11:38-42).

Paul issued a condemnation of "the traditions of men" in general, linking them with "philosophy of vain deceit" and "rudiments of the world" (Col. 2:8). These may have involved both Jewish and incipient Gnostic influences (vv. 16-23). These traditions were decidedly harmful and negative. They would "spoil" (i.e., carry off as booty) any saint who embraced them because they were "not after [i.e., contrary to] Christ."

Modern applications

Like the washing traditions of the Jews – harmless in themselves – there are many "traditions" among the Lord's people today. Most congregations have a set order of worship on the Lord's day, as determined by their bishops. This arrangement is followed in keeping with doing all things "decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40). This practice, as long as it involves all five avenues of worship, is not only allowable, but commendable. Some congregations have followed the same order for several years, and this "tradition" has been handed down to succeeding generations. This tradition is not forbidden, bad, or negative. It is fully allowable, for the Lord has not bound a certain sequence of acts of worship.

What if the leaders of this congregation decided that its worship order is the only one that is Scriptural, binding it on other congregations and accusing them of sin if they did not follow it? This would change the issue entirely. This formerly innocent tradition would thereby become negative and harmful, akin to the washings tradition of the Jews.

Those familiar with church history are aware that this very thing occurred in the early twentieth century. A small segment of brethren professed seeing in Acts 2:42 an inviolable “pattern” for the order of worship. They insisted that the sermon must be first, the contribution second, the Lord’s supper third, and prayer fourth. They sought to bind this on all of the church. Resisting brethren correctly pointed out that, since there is no singing in this passage at all and that it was a stretch to identify *fellowship* with the contribution, this passage could hardly be a binding pattern. The tradition-binders were unsuccessful, as they should have been.

A similar phenomenon occurred several years later over the employment of full-time preachers, having Bible classes, using uninspired study guides, and employing multiple cups in the Lord’s supper. None would question a congregation’s right to choose not to do any of these things if it chose. However, some brethren began to bind upon every congregation their option (i.e., tradition) not to use these aids. They simply followed the sorry example of the scribes and Pharisees who bound their otherwise allowable tradition of washings.

An even later iteration of this behavior arose at the middle of the twentieth century. Some brethren decided not to (1) eat a meal on church-owned property, (2) care for orphan children out of the church treasury, or (3) send money to another congregation for evangelistic work. All was well until some of these brethren began trying to bind their tradition upon the whole church. Those who refused to be bound by their traditions were labeled “liberals” and “digressives” and our practices “sinful.” The Lord could not allow the scribes and Pharisees to bind doctrines or practices that He had not bound, and neither can His followers, even though the things being bound may be optional. No man or group of men has the right to bind human practice or doctrine (even if it is innocent or allowable) as Divine law. To do so makes it damnable.

The other class of negative traditions relates to things the Lord unconditionally prohibits. **Such things are not allowable even if not bound.** They become wrong twice over when they are both forbidden and bound. Such things are innately wrong because, like the Corban tradition, they involve unauthorized practices that add to, contradict, and/or supersede the law of God. One need only glance at Roman Catholic dogma and practice to find ample manifestations. Protestant denominationalism provides a similar long list of forbidden traditions. Traditions such as these are the ones about which Paul warns (Col. 2:8).

It is unspeakably lamentable that erring brethren have for some time been borrowing unabashedly from these forbidden “traditions of men” and are fastening them upon

congregations of the Lord's people as rapidly as they dare. The great irony of the behavior of these change agents is that they often excuse what they do and teach as an effort to **resist** "tradition." They cry out against the allowable "two songs, a prayer, a song, a sermon..." order of worship as an unhealthy "tradition," which they aim to replace with unauthorized acts – new human traditions of their own making.

They begin by changing the order of worship every week. Then they gradually begin changing the acts. Before long, the innovations are so many and the performances so intricate as to require the hiring of a "Praise Minister" to choreograph and coach the theatrics of the "praise teams."

The restriction of Scripture, not tradition, is what they cannot abide! Truly, they are traditionalists of the deepest dye, only they prefer the forbidden traditions of men to the traditions which the Lord either allows or mandates. There is the rub. God's faithful people must resist all such efforts to establish unauthorized and forbidden traditions with the same zeal – and for the same reasons – God charged Israel to resist the gods of the Canaanites.

Positive Traditions

The New Testament allows a wide variety of practices that expedite authorized and obligatory actions in the work and worship of God (note: a practice cannot be "expedient" if it is not authorized). The Lord commands us to preach the Gospel to the whole creation (Mark 16:15–16), but He does not restrict our means of going or preaching. Thus, any means of travel and preaching that expedites this command is allowable. All of our expedient options (e.g., song books, a baptistery, a place to assemble, a public address system, times of meeting, et al.) may be rightly called "traditions," for they have been handed down to us. All such things are "positive traditions," allowable, but not obligatory.

The keeping of some traditions is obligatory, however. Hence Paul **commanded** the keeping of "traditions" in two passages and used *tradition* an additional time in a favorable way:

Now I praise you that ye remember me in all things, and hold fast the **traditions**, even as I delivered them to you (1 Cor. 11:2).

So then, brethren, stand fast, and hold the **traditions** which ye were taught, whether by word, or by epistle of ours (2 The. 2:15).

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the **tradition** which they received of us (2 The. 3:6, emph. DM).

The traditions Paul enjoined were those he delivered, and they involved the things which he taught and which others received, both orally and in writing. He was obviously employing this word in these passages to refer to the inspired message he received – the revelation of Truth he delivered to them. The keeping of these traditions is not optional, but obligatory, because they are the authoritative message of the inspired New Testament.

Conclusion

May we all carefully learn to recognize negative traditions – forbidden, either because they are innocent practices some bind as law when God has not bound them or because they contradict and supplant God’s law. May we also allow each other freedom to practice optional traditions, while being ever careful to hold to the obligatory ones of God’s inspired Word.

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