

View

Is “traditionalism” all bad?

By David Posey

Doing something over and over without thinking about it is dangerous to one’s spiritual health, if that’s the only motive for doing it. Have you ever driven for miles down a highway and then suddenly startled yourself as you realize that you don’t remember anything about those miles?

The same can happen in our service to God. We must always be aware of the danger of falling into a mechanical routine and “doing without thinking” just because we’ve learned it from our parents or others. Things can become tradition very easily.

But is tradition itself the real problem? Is it always dangerous to do things the same way for many years? And does changing things always solve the problem or can it create new ones?

In this article, I will explore some of the questions about traditionalism and its affect on our mind and our work, both imagined and real.

What is “traditionalism”?

Here’s how the dictionary defines “tradition.”

1. The passing down of elements of a culture from generation to generation, esp. by oral communication.
2.
 - a. A mode of thought or behavior followed by a people continuously from generation to generation; custom or usage.
 - b. A set of such customs and usage viewed as a coherent body of precedents influencing the present.
3. A body of unwritten religious precepts.
4. A time-honored practice or a set of such practices. [ME *tradicion* < OFr. < Lat. *traditio* < *tradere*, to hand down : trans, over + dare, to give.]

Tra-di-tion-al-ism

1. Adherence to tradition, esp. strict reverence for religious tradition.

Biblical usage

The Greek word which describes the concept of “tradition” is *paradosis*, used 13 times in the New Testament. The Bauer: Arndt and Gingrich Lexicon describes the word this way:

handing down or over 1. =betrayal, arrest 2. tradition, of teachings, commandments, narratives, et. al. Mt. 15:2, 3, 6 (Mk. 7:3, 5, 8, 9, 13) Re: traditions of the Pharisees nullified or made God’s word of no effect because it led to conduct that violated the spirit of God’s word.

Galatians 1:14; Colossians 2:8. Paul refers to how firmly he once held to his “ancestral traditions” (Gal. 1:14); he

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Meeting at 900 E. Natoma
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916/608-4866

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Evangelist/Editor

David Posey: 530/676-9514
dpaulposey@mac.com

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called the Colossian heresy “the traditions of men,” referring to philosophy which sought to overthrow the faith of Christians.

I Cor. 11:2; II Thess. 2:15; 3:6. In I Cor. 11:2 Paul praises the Corinthians because they hold firmly to the traditions, i.e., Christian teaching.

In II Thess. 2:15, Paul encourages the Thessalonians to “hold to the traditions which you were taught”; i.e., the gospel which had been “handed down.”

In II Thessalonians 3:6, Paul commands the brethren to withdraw from those who refuse to live according to the tradition which they had received from Paul.

Is Customary Practice Condemned in Scripture?

“Tradition” as used in the Bible can be either a bad thing, a good thing, or a neutral thing. For example, if we practice the “traditions of the fathers” (Mt. 15)

TRADITION

- ◆ There is nothing inherently evil in the word “tradition.”
- ◆ We usually do not attach the same meaning to the word in our use of it as it has in the Bible.
- ◆ “Tradition” as referring to practicing something in the same way over a period of time (e.g., worship assemblies) is not covered by Scripture.

or “human tradition” (Col. 2:8) then our practice would be sin. But both of those were opponents to the gospel and led those who were practicing them in an opposite direction to a violation of the gospel. Those who use the word “tradition” today to refer to our activities (or, perhaps, a mindset) in a local church are using it

more in the sense of the dictionary definition for “tradition” given above in 2.a. Perhaps “customary practice” would be a clearer designation for what we are doing.

What is the real issue?

Those who warn us of “traditionalism” are usually concerned about the form of our worship assemblies, including the practice of preaching, taking the Lord’s Supper, etc. Of course, traditionalism can also affect the way we function in

other areas, including our loyalty to a building or to a certain group of people. The question then is whether “customary practice” is sinful or, at least, bad judgment leading to mechanistic worship.

What does the Bible say? “Custom” is often mentioned without indicating approval or disapproval. E.g., “It became a custom in Israel” (Judges 11:39). The Law of Moses was full of ordinances that were to be customarily practiced. Cf. II Chron. 30:16. There was little latitude in the Old Covenant Law with regard to worship and sacrifice. Every detail was planned out by God and one veered from the plan only at his own risk. Nadab and Abihu are good examples (Lev. 10).

Daniel, in Babylon, prayed three times a day, “as was his custom since early days” (Dan. 6:10). His custom did not cause him to fall into mechanistic routine.

Malachi was the last prophet before John the Baptist came on the scene. What did he condemn? Some are under the impression that Malachi prophesied against routine practices, but that badly misses the point of the book. The people were not scolded for their customary practices, but for not giving their best, growing weary of worship and not giving proper reverence to God’s name (Chapter 1).

Unlike us, they had no option to change the format of worship, since that was fixed by the Law — change was strictly forbidden. The problem was not with the Law, but with the hearts of those who were practicing the Law.

In the NT, we read that on the Sabbath, Jesus customarily entered the synagogue, and stood up to read (Luke 4:16). Paul also had a custom of entering into the synagogue on the Sabbath day (Acts 17:2). Who would accuse Jesus or Paul of being mechanistic, just because they routinely went to the synagogue on the Sabbath?

Summary

Customary practices (“tradition”), if right in themselves, are not only permitted by the examples, but often cited with approval. Again, we are faced with the conclusion that practices, whether of the congregation or of an individual, are not inherently improper just because they are repeated over and over. There is, in fact, much to be said for “righteous habit.” We could use more of it.

When does custom inhibit worship and learning?

Custom can inhibit worship, but when? First, we need to understand the term “worship.”

Tradition, from p. 1

Worship is praise, honor and adoration directed toward God. When we assemble, it is not primarily for ourselves, but for God: God is the audience. This point is lost on those who place the emphasis on meeting the needs of the group instead of worshipping the God for whom the group ostensibly exists. Proper worship must be aimed at exalting God and, from the standpoint of the participants, drawing them closer to God. The aim is not to create a "mood" or to keep everyone entertained. It is to worship God.

Though hard to fathom, given our culture and practice, scholars point out that there may have been as much weeping in early church assemblies as there was rejoicing. There is little information on what occurred in first century assemblies, but they probably were not unlike that of late Jewish assemblies. In Nehemiah 8, the people wept as Ezra read the law.

When does custom become sin?

Customary practice is wrong when we allow it to become the reason for our service. If I assemble just because it is my practice to do so, and forget that the real reason is to worship God, then it has become a curse to me, instead of a blessing. It is also wrong when we allow it to dictate every aspect of our service, for no better reason than that "this is what we've always done."

It is not so much the form, as the mindset. Tradition can become law, and if it does, it has become sin. It is not "speaking as the oracles of God" (I Pet. 4:11). The church should be willing to make changes in the form when those changes will accomplish something substantive. Changes designed only to touch the emotions without affecting the mind are not only pointless, but dangerous. Someone pointed out one time that it is "very dangerous to give the non-worshipping heart the feeling of having worshipped."

In other words, if I am so moved on the outside that my mind never engages to fulfill the purpose of worship, I may be deceived into thinking I have worshipped when I did nothing of the sort. If we control the atmosphere and arrange the service in such a way that promotes a selfish "worship," then

we have contributed to a fiction. The person who attends may think he has worshipped; he may even feel good. But he may have been light years away from authentic worship.

How can we tell if we've allowed customary practices to become mechanical routine? I don't believe we can do it by observation, necessarily. I cannot read the mind of a one who comes to an assembly and I have no desire to do so. People worship God in various ways. If we impose a certain style on the worshipper, we are treading on dangerous ground. People's praise takes different forms. For example, when their first child is born, some are very demonstrative and vocal, others very quiet and reflective. Is one right and the other wrong? Of course not.

Sometimes people will make these kinds of judgments without realizing it. Whenever I hear someone describing a sermon or prayer and say "he was very sincere," I cringe a bit. In the first place, how do we know whether a person was sincere or not? We can't make that judgment by listening to them. People have looked me in the eye, through tears in their own eyes, while lying through their teeth.

Even though we gather to worship, worship is primarily a personal matter and each person must examine himself (II Cor. 13:5). The criteria is to worship "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). How can we be certain we are doing that? There is one primary way we can keep that command: we need to know the truth and be excited about it. I don't know any other way to worship "in truth and spirit." That means we need to be conversant with Scripture and be enthusiastic about the hope and promise it affords.

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