

TRADITIONALISM AND “CHURCHES”

“But we always have done it this way before.” Jesus encountered, and condemned, this same attitude among the Pharisees of his day. “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” (Mark 2.18).¹ “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat” (Matthew 15.2). In other words, the Jewish leaders asked Jesus, “Why don’t your followers do things the way we always have done them?” Jesus was not a traditionalist. Where God had not spoken, there was freedom. His followers either could fast or not fast. There was no Old Covenant law that demanded fasting, except on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16.29; 23.27). Likewise, his followers could wash their hands or not wash their hands before a common meal. There was no Old Covenant law that required the washing of hands before a meal. Jesus refused to be bound by human traditions, and he criticized traditions that contradicted the plain teaching of scripture. For example, Jesus censured the Pharisees for their tradition of Corban, because it violated the commandment to “honor your father and mother” (see Matthew 15.1-9; Mark 7.1-13). Such tradition hinders the life and growth of true faith. So, do we contradict the Word of God by some of our human traditions?

First, take note of a few New Testament scriptures that use the word “tradition.” Two of these use “tradition” in a positive sense, and two of these use “tradition” in a negative way.

So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter (2 Thessalonians 2.15).

¹Scripture references unless noted otherwise are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (1989).

Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us (2 Thessalonians 3.6).

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition. . . . You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. . . . [You] make void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this (Mark 7.8ff.).

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ (Colossians 2.8).

The word “tradition” means “that which is handed down” or “that which is delivered over” (that is, from one person to another). Regarding Christian teaching or doctrine, there are traditions of human origin, and there are traditions of divine origin. The latter includes what is called apostolic tradition or the teachings of and about Jesus that have been handed down to his people through the apostles (see 1 Corinthians 11.2; 15.3). Apostolic tradition is good tradition; it is necessary tradition. Apostolic tradition would include teaching about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, the second coming of Jesus, holy living (for example, love for one another, forgiveness, Christian benevolence), the Lord’s supper, baptism, and so forth. These are important and necessary traditions of Christian faith and practice. Apostolic tradition is this important, because by such we are saved (see 1 Corinthians 15.2). For this reason, the apostle Paul exhorts, “So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter” (2 Thessalonians 2.15).

On the other hand, there are traditions that are not so important. In fact, human traditions can be harmful and damaging to Christian faith and the life of God’s people if the keeping of such traditions sets aside, or causes us to neglect or disobey, the commands of God. Now, human traditions are not bad in and of themselves. But they become destructive, if they cause us

to violate any commandment of God. For example, most Churches of Christ, as well as other Christian churches, have nice buildings for “worship services.” This erecting of physical structures by churches for their “divine services” is a human tradition. It is a cultural phenomena and plausibly indicative of an ancient way of thinking that supposes deity needs a house or a place to dwell. But the Bible teaches:

The Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands; as the prophet says:

Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.
What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord,
or what is the place of my rest?
Did not my hand make all these things? (Acts 7.48-50).

The erecting of buildings by churches simply is a human tradition, and there is no apostolic tradition for such. If I am wrong about this, find it in scripture. Certainly, Christians in the first century used such “religious structures,” like Herod’s temple in Jerusalem and synagogues throughout the Roman Empire, as places to gather together and praise God. But early followers of Jesus did not build physical structures called “churches.” To the contrary, they met with one another in houses (see 1 Corinthians 16.19; Colossians 4.15) or a “room upstairs” (Acts 20.8). Granted, this human tradition of erecting buildings is not bad in and of itself. But are expensive investments in brick and mortar justifiable when we neglect certain teachings of God’s Word?² The Bible says, “Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers” (Romans 12.13). And we are told, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. . . . So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and

²See David W Fletcher, “Stewardship and the Meetinghouse” (Fall 1982); available online at: <<http://www.davidwfletcher.com/religion-files---doctrine-and-practice.php>>.

especially for those of the family of faith” (Galatians 6.2, 10). Could it be that we are much like the Pharisees, who were traditionalists, in our self-imposed need to build edifices to “worship” our God? Have our “churches” become our Corban? If this sounds far-fetched, just remember that the Pharisees excused themselves from helping their parents by paying money to the temple treasury (see Mark 7.11-13). Do we also “do many things like this”?