

Against Traditional Worship

"Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem.² Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault.³ For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders.⁴ When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.⁵ Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?"⁶ He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.⁷ And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'"

(Mark 7:1-7)

Introduction

We love traditions. We have family traditions. We have national traditions. We have fireworks on the 4th of July. We have special days of remembrance where we take off work and have parades. And we stand up at the beginning of the ball game, and take off our caps, and sing, "O say can you see?" We have many great traditions which celebrate the meaning of things we treasure, which teach us about what happened in the past, and remind us what's important for us to remember in the future.

We have many traditions in the church also, good traditions filled with meaning, which have been given by God and his prophets and apostles. Paul writes, in 2Thess 2:15, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle." And speaking about the behavior of women in public worship, he writes in 1Cor 11:2, "Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you." In fact, talking about the Apostle's command that Christians should be diligent, he writes in 2Thess 3:6, "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." We have in the church an important tradition. Paul writes, "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you" (1Cor 11:23). We talk rightly about *apostolic tradition*, but what we really mean is *divine tradition*, keeping the commands and practices which God has given to his church through his Apostles and Prophets, and Christ Jesus himself the chief cornerstone.

But the question comes up for the church, what about other traditions? We all know the power that tradition has to teach, to remind, and to make things significant. Tradition has an almost supernatural power to turn something ordinary into something sacred. Can tradition be used in the church as a force for good? Can we create more Bible-based traditions—traditions which teach us and remind us of Biblical truth, traditions which celebrate our redemption in Jesus Christ?

That's a very good question. What would be wrong with doing in the church what we do in our family or in our country? What would be wrong with using this incredible medium for making things *special* and *sacred* for things which really are *special* and *sacred*? Can't we add some Bible-based ceremonies or practices which would help us to treasure the truth of God? That is the question. And the answer is given by our Lord Jesus with most surprising force and clarity.

Question: *Why don't Jesus and the disciples hold the "The Tradition of the Elders"? (v. 1-5)*

Why won't Jesus wash his hands? The last few centuries before Christ came were marked by a huge increase in the number of traditions practiced by the people of God, many of which still continue to this day among Orthodox Jews. Still today they count these traditions as precious, full of deep meaning and significance, part of their ancient heritage and the beauty of their worship. After the Jews returned from exile, the elders and scribes were very concerned that the people not forget or neglect the law. And they added various traditions which would be helpful and instructive to people's faith. The Jews call them the "*traditions of the elders*," Bible-based traditions which aimed to promote holiness and obedience among the people of God. And because they were made by the *elders*, and because they were *Biblically based*, that is, connected to some Bible truth, the traditions were very widely practiced. These were helpful, meaningful traditions which were handed down by the elders. But very strangely, our Lord and his disciples would not practice them.

Verse 2, “Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the *tradition of the elders*” (7:2-3). They were scandalized that Jesus would not keep the traditions of their elders. And Mark notes by the way in verse 4, “There are *many* other things which they have received and hold.” Verse 5, “The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the *tradition of the elders*, but eat their bread with impure hands?”

And Jesus gives them a most stunning, sharp rebuke, a rebuke that needs to be heard again today as so many, even in the Reformed church, are rapidly multiplying traditions. It’s probably a much stronger rebuke than you’d expect Jesus to give over a little tradition like hand-washing. I wonder what your response might be? Verse 6, “And He said to them, “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’” Why this rebuke, which sounds so over the top? Let’s look at the reason under two headings. First, we may not add man’s traditions to God’s perfect word. And second, man’s traditions will eventually take away from observing God’s perfect word.

Answer 1. Do not add man’s traditions to God’s perfect word (v. 6-7)

The first thing I want you to see is that there is a kind of worship which Jesus says is completely in vain. And it’s a kind of worship which almost everyone was practicing. It had been handed down from the elders. It appears to “honor” God externally. But it reveals hypocritical hearts, for if they loved Him, they would have kept his commands. This is a warning also for us. There *is* a kind of worship which is vain, no matter how popularly practiced and how anciently venerated—a kind of worship which may be pressed upon us by others, and a kind of worship which we must nevertheless refuse.

Of course, there’s the danger that a man-made tradition can contradict the Word of God. But what I want you to see in these first seven verses is that even if a tradition does not contradict God’s word, simply adding any man-made worship or tradition into the worship and traditions of God is strictly forbidden. What we have in verses 1 through 7 is a dispute over something as innocent, as good, as helpful as the washing of hands before eating.

Does the washing of hands in any way contradict anything that the Bible says anywhere else? Did the OT say, “You shall eat food with dirty hands?” And then did the elders come along and say, “No, you shall not eat food with dirty hands?” I think you can see, even with a limited knowledge of the Law of Moses, that this is simply not the case. The washing of hands is nowhere either forbidden or commanded in the Bible. It’s a matter of total indifference to Biblical religion. Kids, you still have to wash your hands. The elders simply added this tradition.

There are, of course, Biblical references to having clean hands. This is a Bible-based tradition, to symbolize and bring to mind God’s word. In Psalm 24, David asks, “Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart.” Now, everybody knows that David isn’t talking about washing your hands. He’s talking about *doing* righteousness. It’s parallel to having a pure heart. And of course, as believers, we shouldn’t allow uncleanness inside our heart. Now, we know that this means evil, not dirt. What’s wrong with having a nice, helpful tradition to remind us of these things? And then if anybody asks, “Why do you wash your hands before you eat?” You can say, “Oh, to remind us that God has commanded that his people spiritually to have clean hands and a pure heart. What’s wrong with that? It has an “appearance of wisdom” (Col 2:23), does it not? It’s a meaningful, significant, helpful tradition. And clearly, there’s nothing wrong with washing your hands before you eat. In fact, that’s a tradition in our home. But what’s wrong with making this a kind of religious tradition, giving it spiritual significance?

What’s wrong is that at the end of the day, God never commanded you to wash your hands before you eat. And this is what’s hard to get across to people. There’s a great deal in the family, in the state, in the world, in your own life that’s entirely up to you. You’re free to make up whatever traditions you like, as long as they don’t violate the word of God.

But, when you want to do something in Christian practice or in “worship,” something which would have “value against the indulgence of the flesh” (Col 2:23), something which would make your spiritual life more

significant, God says, “I’ll tell you what to do. If you want to know what true worship is, what pleases me, what traditions you should observe, what will sanctify you, look no further than my word. I will guide you with my eye, and teach you all you need to know.”

Don’t think this is strict. It’s just the reverse. According to God’s word, this is freeing to us. We are free from men. And this means that we don’t have to sit around thinking up what God might like. This means that we don’t have to worry that we haven’t come up with the most helpful traditions in the church. It means we know what kind of worship to offer God, what would please him, and what would be most helpful to us also.

These man-made religious traditions and practices are called the “doctrines of demons” in 1 Tim 4:1-3, “But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, [and then he gives several examples such as] men who … advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.” You shouldn’t drink wine. No fish on Fridays, you name it—the doctrine of demons.

For the most comprehensive statement of this principle in the New Testament, please look at Col 2:20-23. It’s not just Jews who liked to create man-made traditions or borrow worship ideas from the other nations. Paul warns the church against the empty traditions and asceticism which coming over from both Jews and Greeks. Verse 8 begins this section, “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). He warns them specifically against the traditions of the Judaizers and others. And he concludes in verse 20, “Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle, which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the *commandments and doctrines of men*? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in *self-imposed religion* [or *will-worship*], false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.”

This was a critical struggle in the times of Christ and his Apostles, and they wrote and spoke in order to defend the true liberty which all believers enjoy in Christ, that we are not to pay any mind to the commandments and traditions of men, but only to the word of God. But back in Mark 7, Jesus gives one more reason against self-imposed religion.

Answer 2. Do not take away from observing God’s word by Man’s traditions (v. 8-13)

Starting in verse 8, Jesus turns the corner and begins pointing them to where the traditions of men inevitably lead. “For *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*. He said to them, “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘If a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban’’’—(that is, a gift to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And *many such things you do*.”

He shows them how far their man-made traditions had led them astray, in Jesus words, even “making the word of God of no effect.” And this is always the danger of self-imposed religion. You think it’s going to help you. You think that a few good traditions and nice ceremonies and more meaningful worship and Bible-based practices will make God more special to you. But what inevitably happens, historically speaking, is that Biblical religion is first pushed to the side then flatly contradicted. We must hold tenaciously to the doctrine of “liberty of conscience.”

Doctrine: “Liberty of Conscience”

Here’s the official statement from our church’s own confession of faith. Right before our chapter on worship, we have a very important and well-placed chapter on our Christian liberty and liberty of conscience:

20.2. God alone is Lord of the conscience,^(k) and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship.^(l) So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience:^(m) and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience,

and reason also. (n) (k) Jas. 4:12; Rom. 14:4 (l) Acts 4:19; 5:29; 1Cor. 7:23; Mt. 23:8-10; 2Cor. 1:24; Mt. 15:9 (m) Col. 2:20,22,23; Gal. 1:10; 2:4,5; 5:1 (n) Rom. 10:17; 14:23; Is. 8:20; Acts 17:11; John 4:22; Hos. 5:11; Rev. 13:12,16,17; Jer. 8:9.

This is the doctrine of “Liberty of Conscience.” And sometimes people talk about the “regulative principle of worship” implying that this only applies to what we do in our public worship. I hope you can see from this hand-washing example, it applies in and out of public worship, to *all* our Christian duty. Our Lord does speak in Mark 7 about “worship,” but clearly it’s not public worship. It’s worship broadly considered. But our chapter on worship begins this way:

21.1. The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and doth good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. (a) But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture. (b) (a) Rom. 1:20; Acts 17:24; Ps. 119:68; Jer. 10:7; Ps. 31:23; 18:3; Rom. 10:12; Ps. 62:8; Josh. 24:14; Mk. 12:33 (b) Dt. 12:32; Mt. 15:9; Acts 17:25; Mt. 4:9,10; Dt. 4:15-20; Ex. 20:4-6; Col. 2:23.

This is sometimes derided as the “Puritan principle of worship,” but it far predates any puritans—or reformers for that matter. One of the clearest statements given in this matter was in the late 100s by Tertullian. “That is prohibited which is not permitted.” Tertullian, *De corona* 2.4. Again, “We, however, are not permitted to cherish any object after our own will, nor yet to make any choice of that which another has introduced of his private fancy. In the Lord’s apostles we possess our authority; for even they did not of themselves choose to introduce anything, but faithfully delivered to the nations (of mankind) the doctrine which they received from Christ.” “On Prescription Against Heretics,” ANF 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 246.

Application of the Principle

We must continually remind ourselves that we are not servants of men but children of God; and school ourselves in the habit of asking: These doctrines, these traditions, these forms of worship, these rules and prohibitions people are proposing—are they from our Father? Are they from the Lord of our conscience? This is not something peripheral or optional. This one the one hand about how God should be glorified in his saints, and on the other, about whether we will follow men who are intermeddling in the household of God, an affront to our father’s sovereignty. Paul warns, “You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men” (1Cor 7:13). Now I’d like to give you a few Biblical examples to illustrate how this situation is to be handled.

(a) Hand Washing (Mark 7:1-7)

In Mark 7, the elders have instituted this tradition of washing of hands before eating. Is there anything wrong with washing hands? No. Will Jesus and the disciples submit to it for the sake of peace, then? Absolutely not, in fact he offers a stunning rebuke which will bring anything but peace. They will not participate because it’s become a religious ceremony. Can they wash their hands if it’s not a religious tradition? Of course.

(b) Circumcision (Gal 5:1-2,13 vs. Acts 16:3)

Second example, can Gentiles be circumcised? That was a very pressing question in NT times, because of a certain group in the church. And the question is not simply *must* the Gentiles be circumcised, but *can* Gentiles be circumcised, even for the peace and unity of the church? What do you think? Is there something sinful about circumcision? Did God say no Gentiles should be circumcised? No, I hope not.

But if this church wanted men to be circumcised, could you submit to it for the sake of peace? Paul’s answer is, absolutely not. Several places, but compare Galatians 5:1, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing.... For you, brethren, have been called to liberty,” (Gal 5:1-2, 13). When it’s a matter of *Christian* circumcision, Paul replies with the most stinging rebuke. There is absolutely no religious tradition or ceremony, Jewish or otherwise, which may be introduced among the people of God. Now, if Timothy is under no compulsion and wants to become like a Jew to win the Jews, can he be circumcised? The answer is, yes. Acts 16:3, “Paul wanted to have [Timothy] go on with him. And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region.” It’s not Christian

circumcision, there's no religious significance to Paul and Timothy whatsoever. You're free to be circumcised.

(c) Holy Days (*Gal 4:9-11, Col 2:16 vs. Acts 20:16*)

Third example, can we make up Christian days of religious observance? I don't mean fasts or feasts which the Lord's given us and promised to reward. But can we have Christian holidays? Again, Paul says, absolutely not. For example, the Jews wanted the church to adopt their days and new moons and so forth. Galatians 4:9-11, "But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain." Col 2:16, "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths." Even though these days were days of God's own institution, they're now fulfilled in Christ. Passover, Pentecost, and so forth may no longer have any religious observance. But can we make up Christian holidays? This became a pressing question in our history, in the Church of Scotland, because of the 5th article of Perth, where the King wanted Scotland to observe Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost. Though this issue doesn't come up in the NT, understand that if days which had formerly been appointed by *God* were not optional in the church, what can be said of days of *man's* appointment. God wanted all the old days and months and seasons and years to be fulfilled in Christ, in the Lord's Day, 52 celebrations of Christ per year.

When you start making holy days, let me ask you this: Which days become more holy, the days God makes holy or the ones that man makes holy? In other words, just talking about the man on the street, are Christmas and Easter (which are man's holy days) more sacred than Sunday (that day that God has said to remember and keep holy)? I think that the answer is obvious. As soon as man creates holy days, they instantly depreciate the day God has said to remember and keep holy.

Can the Church observe holy days which God has in this age not made holy? Paul gives a sharp rebuke, absolutely not! However, if Paul wants to go to Jerusalem and win Jews, can he attend the festival? That's Paul's practice, Acts 20:16. In fact, he's arrested in Jerusalem during the Jewish festival, after undergoing ceremonial purification, Acts 21:24. It's not a Christian practice, and he's under no compulsion. He's completely free.

Now, let me give you a little wisdom in applying this. First, you know I don't have any problem with singing advent hymns of Jesus' birth. I think they're appropriate any time of year. And I think that families are completely free to give presents and have a tree and see Santa Claus and enjoy every other cultural tradition that we've made. Because these are American traditions. There's nothing Christian about a Christmas tree or jolly old Saint Nick. But perhaps you've never noticed—I never say the word "Christmas" up here during worship, and I will not make this something the congregation should observe. I realize this is the opposite of what many of you have learned, that we should make Jesus the reason for the season. And if you're struggling, Charles Spurgeon has a good sermon on "The Christian and Christmas." I'm glad to sing of Christ's birth and even preach on it. I will impose no further practice on the church.

One more piece of wisdom in applying this principle, the whole chapter of Romans 14. Christian liberty is supposed to free you from the control of men, that we might serve the Lord without fear. So, don't go despising or judging individual Christians whom Paul says are "weak in faith," who observe a certain day to the Lord, who doesn't eat meat for the Lord's sake, and so forth. Teachers and churches get a strong rebuke when they teach these things. But if your Christian brother observes a day to the Lord or does not eat meat or something, Paul says, "Let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way." (Rom 14:13). You can instruct those who are weak in faith, as Paul does. But do not judge them, despise them, or cause them to stumble.

(d) And everything else - Jeroboam's Reforms (*1Kings 12:32-33, 14:16*)

Finally, here's one final comprehensive example, which illustrates several facets of the problem Scotland faced in the early days. 1Kings 12:32-33, "And at Bethel he [Jeroboam] installed the priests of the high places which he had made. So he made offerings on the altar which he had made at Bethel on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, in the month which he had devised in his own heart. And he ordained a feast for the children of Israel, and offered sacrifices on the altar and burned incense." Jeroboam comes up with his own priesthood,

though God had given that priesthood no authority. He installs them in the high places, to make them convenient for the worshipper, rather than going to Jerusalem. He comes up with offerings on a date “which he had devised in his own heart.” And he ordains his own festival for the children of Israel, complete with sacrifices and incense offered to Jehovah. Could you submit to that? Could you lawfully observe Jeroboam’s feast on Jeroboam’s day, at Jeroboam’s place, with Jeroboam’s priests? This is the judgment on the nation in 1Kings 14:16, “And He will give Israel up because of the sins of Jeroboam, who sinned and who made Israel sin.” These man-made additions to God’s ministry, temple, calendar, offerings, and festivals, though they came with all the authority of the elders, though they were enormously—almost universally—popular among the Northern Kingdom—was the cause of Israel’s undoing. True, they wanted to sin. But no matter what they wanted, Jeroboam “made them sin.” This was henceforth called the “sin of Jeroboam,” from which the nation never recovered. Jeroboam led the people to their ruin by giving them what they wanted.

Conclusion

There is a kind of worship that’s not pleasing to God. And that’s a scary thought. If our worship is not pleasing to God, we’ve got to change our worship. As we said last time, Worship is not having a full heart and doing what you please. Worship is having a full heart and doing what pleases God. It’s not to be like the Canaanites (Deut 12:2-5, 30-31). It’s not “every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes (Deut 12:8-12). It’s not adding or taking away (Deut 12:32).

Our commitment to Christ leads us to a very distinctive Biblical worship, very ironically mocked as “traditional worship” by people who are used to worship chock-full of the practices and traditions of men.

Let’s be careful about judging both “traditional” and “contemporary” churches. Some will say, “I have trouble at this church, because they’re getting way from hymns.” Did God say don’t get away from hymns? If he did, you’d better not get away from them. If he didn’t, you need to recognize that you’re probably saying much more about yourself than you are about the church you’re visiting. When you go visiting somewhere, don’t place a burden on your conscience when the Lord of your conscience has placed none. What’s important is having a full heart and doing what pleases God. And that may sound very different from church to church. Jesus is against “traditional” worship, whether old or new. Let that be sufficient.

This is the important difference between “faith or worship” and other things in our Christian lives. Parents may tell children to wash their hands. Governments may tell citizens to wash their hands. But elders absolutely may not tell Christians to wash their hands. I am a minister, not a magistrate. I declare, I do not legislate. You are free from all men. And you must not allow yourselves to be brought into bondage, to use Jesus words, of any doctrine, worship, or commandments of men. You may not subject yourselves to any traditions of any elders, no matter how popular, no matter how ancient, no matter what enticement or appearance of wisdom they possess. You are free. You must learn to live as free. God alone is the Lord of your conscience. This is the precious gift of your Christian liberty, for which Christ died.