

Customs, Traditions, Culture and the Bible

Customs, traditions, and culture have shaped, defined, and guided humanity since the beginning of time. They are the fabric that unites a social group, and are the basis for all relationships within that group. They are the tools for creating order, and reinforcing and handing down values and ideals. They can exist within as small a group as a single family, or may extend to an entire nation or religion. Customs, traditions, and culture can be neutral, positive, or negative; and within the Church of God, perhaps no other subject generates as much controversy.

Within Christianity, there are serious misunderstandings of the purpose of “customs”, “traditions”, and “culture”. On one hand, some would have us place our faith entirely in them, and on the other, entirely do away with them. The goal of this essay is to come to a Biblical understanding of these terms and their purpose, and to shed the light of God’s word on this important topic.

A *custom* is a habitual practice of behavior under given circumstances; an established way of doing things; a more or less permanent way of acting reinforced by tradition and social attitudes. There are many examples of customs in the Bible: the “manner” of the Romans, the “custom” of the Jews, and more. We also read how Jesus was “wont” to resort to the Mount of Olives to teach and pray. There are also examples of customs in our everyday lives and among our churches, including: starting times and order of services, day of the week for midweek services, the exchange of greetings and farewells, and the manner of praying during services. Some customs surround special occasions, such as weddings, baptisms, and funerals. Customs arise to meet the need for predictability, practicality, and protocol and are closely related to culture, upbringing, and location. While some customs were adopted out of necessity and were short-lived, others allow for the smooth operation of our families and churches and last for many years.

Although often related to a custom and at times used interchangeably, a *tradition* is the intentional handing down of beliefs and values through practices, especially by word of mouth or custom. Traditions are often created to deal with a particular problem or issue that relates to the group’s values or beliefs. The Greek word for tradition in the Bible comes from *paradosis*, which means “a handing down or on”. Some customs become traditions as they are taught verbally or by example. In the Church, traditions can arise in order to put into practice scriptural teaching. Examples of these include: congregational singing (“Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” Eph 5:19); no recreational dating (“Flee also youthful lusts” 2 Tim 2:22); and methods of applying discipline in the Church (“Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.” 1 Tim 5:20).

When we combine customs and traditions with a group of people, we begin to arrive towards a culture. On a smaller scale, *culture* is the behaviors characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group, or on a larger scale, the sum total ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another. Cultures often reach beyond their location of origin, and are a mosaic of many different factors that uniquely identify and unite the group. A case-in-point are the Jews who, though scattered abroad, can be identified by their customs, traditions, and religion.

Why does the Church need traditions and continue to emphasize their importance? First of all, it is impossible for a group to exist without any traditions or culture to define it. But perhaps most importantly, traditions allow the Church to live out the *doctrine* of Christ — Christ’s commandments, and His revelations written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by the Apostles. God’s Word is the absolute truth and never changes; it does not vary from person to person, circumstance to circumstance, time to time, nor culture to culture. Therefore, traditions founded upon the word of God and proven to be beneficial are especially powerful; to disregard them is perilous: “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 he received of us.” (2 Thes 3:6).

Scriptural traditions must be cherished and taught. Paul's use of the word *tradition* in 2 Thes 2:15 — "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle" — indicates their value and link to doctrine. Christ Himself used traditions as a vehicle for doctrine: "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you..." (1 Cor 11:23)". Paul is referring to the Lord's supper, a direct teaching of Christ to his disciples that was to be practiced and handed down to those who should follow. Traditions unify the brotherhood, establish a sense of identity, and help provide spiritual protection from sin and evil (especially for the weak and less discerning). Those traditions which prove to be spiritually beneficial through the test of time, serve as a vehicle of continuity from one generation to the next. Traditions can change under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but great care must be taken to follow the scriptural command to "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." 1 Thes 5:21.

Although traditions can be spiritually beneficial, they are surrounded by a number of misunderstandings and dangers. One tendency is to make God's Spirit subject to the wisdom of man and his traditions; the opposite is that all past patterns of church practice and worship are no longer "relevant".

Christ's utter condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees was a result of their traditions being in the category of the first error. They are a classic example of bringing God's laws down to man's level while mixing in an imperfect interpretation and imposing them upon others as true doctrine from God. They "made the commandment of God of none effect", taught "for doctrines the commandments of men", and even rejected the commandment of God, that they would keep their own tradition (Mark 7:9). They used traditions to justify ungodly behavior, nullify God's commandments, make physical issues (hand washing) into spiritual issues, keep the people in subjection, and prevent the people from doing what was right. They were more interested in appearance than substance. Jesus' teaching serves as a warning to believers today as well.

On the other extreme, there is the dangerous perspective that traditions are shackles of bondage, and a collection of old-fashioned, unnecessary "man-made" rules. This viewpoint belittles the importance and authority that Christ has placed in His Church. The Bible does not specifically deal with every situation that may confront believers; God has ordained the Church (the pillar and ground of the truth — 1 Tim 3:13) to make decisions and establish traditions based on God's word. This is seen in the early Church: "For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well." (Acts 15:28-29). Since the Church is not an institution but a collection of Spirit-led believers, these decisions are the wisdom and working of the Spirit of God: "To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God," (Eph 3:10).

The common misunderstanding of mistaking doctrine for tradition can be illustrated by studying the Biblical teaching of a woman's head-covering. The grave error here is to assume that when Paul introduced this ordinance in 1 Cor. 11, it was intended only as a local tradition for the Corinthian believers. But in studying the context of his letter, Paul begins by addressing it to "all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ" and toward the end he writes "... the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord". This reveals that what Paul gave the church was actually a sacred symbol of spiritual honor within God's holy order. The manner in which we practice this Biblical teaching is a tradition, but the teaching itself is doctrine.

The keeping of traditions does not grant salvation. The Bible is clear that "a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16). Salvation is only possible by God's grace through the shed blood of His Son Jesus Christ upon the cross, and – through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit – our response of repentance and conversion, and a new life that brings forth the fruit of faith, hope, and charity towards God and mankind.

Although we are many different members, we are united through the common purpose of a love for God and one another, and a will to express this love in worship. Though our customs, traditions, and cultures may vary, our doctrine remains the same. I believe we all look forward to the ultimate expression of the unity of cultures in heaven, where there will be a great multitude “of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues” clothed with white robes and palms in their hands before the Lamb (Rev. 7:9). In light of our rich heritage of customs, traditions, and culture, may we pause to treasure our precious faith and brotherhood. After pausing, may we go forth, work towards unity in Christ by the understanding of our differences in love, with the desire to spend eternity in unity with Christ.

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