



Conducted by
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**“Both Jesus and Paul seem to be very scathing about traditionalism.
Should Christians today also be wary about traditions?”**

This question, as many do, arose out of a Bible Study discussion which indicated a degree of divergent views. I have always held that if Christians differ in their interpretation of the Bible then some effort should be made to clarify the issue, or at least bring it forward for further discussion and study. I think it best to deal with the question in a way which reproduces the differences as they came up. As happens so often during discussions, people give ‘off-the-cuff’ views without actually exploring the basis of what they are really talking about (I believe we are all guilty of this deplorable attitude at times). So let’s see if we can ‘get back to basics’ as the politicians are always saying.

How do we define ‘traditions’?

Before we do this, I would just like to comment on one thing which troubles me, and that is the subject of Bible Study. Study is not half sermon or talk and half discussion on what has been said; it is a meditative examination of the subject matter (in our case the Bible) with a view to understanding it. Even if we have to spend the whole time on *one word*, if that word is crucial to our understanding, then we must

do it. We should also have handy such 'tools' as we may need, e.g. Concordance, Dictionary of N.T. words, different versions of the Scriptures, etc.; if we do not, then we shall be giving our own opinions as to what is meant. At the very top of our list should be the willingness to learn. As we advance in years we begin to realise how little we really know. I thought I'd just get that off my chest, so now to our definition.

Traditions may be defined as "statements, beliefs, customs, etc., transmitted by word of mouth or by practice without writing." Oral traditions are handed down from generation to generation; they may gain or lose a little in the transmission over a period of time. The Scriptures, of course, *are* written accounts of God's dealings with His Creation, and it is these that we must refer ourselves when we want to know the truth. Jesus did *not* say to the Jews, "Search the traditions," He said, "**Search the Scriptures.**" See John 5:39. My own observations have led me to believe that much confusion has resulted from *private* interpretations of Scripture being handed down to future generations, and such interpretations being almost venerated by some until they have become inviolable *traditions*. It is incumbent on us all to act like the Bereans; they heard, and then searched the Scriptures in order to find out if what they had heard was true. So should we.

What did Jesus identify as wrong traditions?

Refer to Mark 7:1-13. The Pharisees confronted Jesus with a 'fault' of His disciples, i.e., They did not wash their hands before eating; they were therefore violating the 'traditions of the elders.' This drew a stinging rebuke from Jesus, "**in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men**" (v7). In this they had "laid aside the commandments of God." Later on, He explained that it wasn't that which went *into* a man from *outside* which defiled him, but it was that which 'came out' from *within* that defiled.

The sin of the Pharisees was not being *irreligious*; it was the fact that what came out from the lips reflected the 'uncircumcised' heart within.

Paul takes up the same theme in Gal. 1:11-24. The Gospel he preached was 'not after man' (v11). He reminds the readers that he profited above many his equals, "**Being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers.**" So we conclude that, subject to what happened later, the traditions of the 'fathers' had not led him in the right direction. He then makes, what is to me, a crucial point. God, by His grace, had separated him so that he might declare Christ to the heathen (Gentiles); he then goes on "**immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood; neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me**" (vv16,17). There were to be no 'middle men,' Christian or otherwise, in Paul's preparation for the truth which God wanted him to declare. Even the darts of the evil one can penetrate the armour of the Christian spirit, for Paul says that he had to withstand Peter to his face, "**because he was to be blamed.**" Peter's blame lay in the fact that he was being 'two-faced' with regard to eating with the Gentiles. Paul saw, "that they walked not uprightly *according to the truth of the Gospel.*" Could there be Christians today who rely on traditions rather than on the purity of the Word? It may be hard to say, but I am convinced there can be.

Should we then ignore traditions?

No, not if they are *right* traditions. Paul exhorted Timothy, "**Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to the faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.**" 2 Tim. 2:1,2. Now we must understand that the things which had to be handed down from generation to generation were not the words or teaching of a *man*. In Tim. 3:16 Paul makes a categorical statement, "**All scripture is given by inspiration of God,**" i. e., the words which Paul spoke were "God-breathed," therefore they could be 'handed over' (that's what tradition really means) with certainty. They

did not, as Jesus rebuked the Jews, “**lay aside the commandment of God;**” how could they, if God had inspired them? Historically, we have seen that ideas and practices which were not Bible based, e.g., the elevation and veneration of the Virgin Mary, the Papacy, etc., were traditions challenged by the Reformists at the time of the Reformation and after. Indeed, the main Reformation teaching was that **all** traditions must be tested by the Bible. So ‘good traditions,’ like the Breaking of Bread, can and should be handed over to faithful Christians who will then pass them on undiluted.

Are there other good traditions?

Yes. We should never despise the power of good example. Paul wrote to the Philippians, “Those things which ye have both learned, and received and heard, *and seen in me*, do.” Phil. 4:9. Similarly to the brethren in Thessalonica, “For yourselves know how ye ought *to follow us*; for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you” 2 Thess. 3:7. And who can forget his advice to Timothy? “Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity” 1 Tim. 4:12.

To learn from good, faithful Christians, who have the Christ and the Word always before them, is a ‘tradition’ which the Church should not ignore. You see, such men will not ‘put aside’ the commandment of God, but will be so intent on maintaining the purity of Christ and His Word, that nothing of them personally, except their example, will show through. The words of John the Baptist are pertinent in the spiritual sense to every individual Christian, “He must increase, but I must decrease;” then we shall hand over traditions which will always enhance the Lord and His Church. But even though we may have respect and regard for our spiritual forefathers, and even though we may honour their work and word, there may come a time when we have to say, like Peter before the Council, “**We ought to obey God rather than men.**”

In conclusion, then, we can say, “Yes, we should be wary of the traditions of men which are not endorsed by God, but those good traditions which **are**, we should strive to maintain in our lives, and ‘hand them down’ to faithful men who will seek to preserve them. Nothing less is acceptable for the Christ whom we love, and for His Church, the glory of which we want to endorse in our lives. For His sake.

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