

Christian Faith and Practice through...Tradition

by Bruce Scott Bertram

“Traditions, traditions. Without our traditions our lives would be as shaky as...as...as a fiddler on the roof.” Tevye, from the movie ‘Fiddler on the Roof.’

This article is directed at the idea of functionality or the efficiency of traditions in communicating the Word of God, as well as the legitimacy of traditions in general. It has many of my heartfelt observations and questions, presented from the view of a Gentile Christian who has had to evaluate and reconstruct his own traditions in light of God’s Word. This evaluation and reconstruction was prompted by the discovery that much of what I was doing was not what God had instructed His children to do, and some of what I *wasn’t* doing He *had* instructed His kids to do. Like my Jewish friend Tevye (I think I can call him a friend because of what we have in common), I have experienced a lot of frustration and pain over the past few years searching for what was right.

Paul tells us three times that he had taught his disciples ‘traditions.’

Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. 1 Corinthians 11:2, NASB

So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us. 2 Thessalonians 2:15, NASB

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. 2 Thessalonians 3:6, NASB

It’s hard to tell from these references just exactly which traditions he taught, but it’s a safe bet that he stuck with those that were directly related to the Word of God. For one thing on other occasions he was careful to distinguish between opinion and God’s Word, such as 1 Corinthians 7:10-12. For another thing he spoke about ‘disputatious matters’ in Romans 14. He seemed acutely aware that there are differences between what is written and what was developed. And finally he must have been aware that Yahshua (Jesus) was disgusted with ‘traditions of men’ that nullified God’s Word.

And He answered and said to them, “Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER,’ and, ‘HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH.’ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “whatever I have that would help you has been given to God,” he is not to honor his father or

his mother.’ And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: ‘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.’” Matthew 15:3-9, NASB (last two verses, 8 and 9, are quoting Isaiah 29:13)

Yahshua (Jesus) was apparently more than a little peeved at the ‘traditions of men’ that had blocked access to the Word of God and also God Himself. He stated flatly that the religious leaders of the time had so loaded the Word with extra traditions that people were having trouble doing what God really wanted them to do (Matthew 23:4). Yahshua left us with no misunderstanding about which traditions He was referring to – those of men (not Jews, not Gentiles, men). Unfortunately, there are many modern religious leaders, whether Jew or Gentile, that have not taken the words of Yahshua to heart. There are many, many current traditions that have so loaded up the Word of God that it has become a heavy weight beyond bearing for many people.

I think all people who say they follow God should seriously look at the traditions they are promoting and what they are saying with them. Not because everyone should be like me and misery loves company, but because with every part of our being the children of God should work hard to promote, practice, and speak God’s Word first and foremost. This is probably the single biggest lesson I had to learn in the last few years. The traditions we hold to (whether Jewish or Christian), while they may not be bad in themselves, must not obscure God’s Word or make it more difficult for other people to follow. We must remove any practice that blocks the path to God or causes people to stumble away from the Word. In my learning process the past few years I had to learn what to include, what to exclude, and what is neutral.

What to Include. One might think this was obvious, but the starting point should always be the Word of God. In practice, however, it doesn’t seem as if we really start there. If He says we should do something, and we claim that He is our King and Lord, then it follows that His children will expend all the effort available to us to do what He says. After all, He is Light, and Life, and Love, so therefore all that He speaks to us embodies who and what He is. His Words, then, are full of Light and Life and Love. If we simply read the Word we would go a long way toward being filled with Light and Life and Love ourselves, which would aide in determining what traditions should be included in the practices of the family of God. Like Tevye says it, “As the Good Book says...” (although he fractures what is in there, too).

The first and foremost tradition sets the tone for all others: Worship God Alone. Anything less falls short of perfection, and why would we want to settle for less? Who is like our God? “Love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5, 7:9, 10:12, 11:1,13,22, 13:3, 19:9, 30:6,16; Joshua 22:5, 23:11, etc.). Other examples of tradition the Word of God mentions are described for

instance in Leviticus 23. These are the ‘appointed times,’ otherwise called feasts or festivals, we are to observe and teach our children. They are “God’s Appointed Times,” not ‘Jewish appointed times’ or ‘Gentile appointed times.’ For those who think this part of God’s Word has been eliminated, I suggest you re-read your Bible, or get a real Bible if yours does not say this. It is not the Word itself that is hard to understand, but the doctrines of men that make His Word blurry and so hard to understand. His Word is also not antiquated or in need of updating, but His Word is One as He is One.

Other traditions His children should follow include loving others as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18), eating only clean animals (Leviticus 11); bathing and washing clothes after becoming unclean (Leviticus 12, 15); providing for the poor and widows and orphans (Deuteronomy 10:18,19); sex in appropriate marriage situations (Leviticus 18); and other items listed for us in various other places. If objection is made that some of His Word is not something we can do at this time (such as sacrificing in the Temple) and so none of it should be practiced, then I would respond by saying that if we love Him as He has loved us we would do all parts of His Word it is within our power to do.

If I can quote my friend Tevye again, as he debated with himself about similar matters, “On the other hand...”

What to Exclude. When God says not to do something, that action should be avoided at all costs. Probably the most important of these is the flip side of the instruction to worship God alone, which is to avoid worshipping or even acknowledging other gods (which are really not gods). Paganism or idolatry, in reality, is listening to or obeying anything or anyone other than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Therefore ignoring any part of what God tells us to practice or not practice is idolatry or paganism.

We are also told by God not to ‘add to’ or ‘take away from’ His Word (Deuteronomy 4:2, 12:32; Proverbs 30:6; Ecclesiastes 3:14; Revelation 22:18,19). We add to God’s Word by elevating our own traditions to the same level as His. We take away from God’s Word when through our traditions we nullify it (make it of no effect). A classic example of adding to God’s Word is the Christian tradition of ‘four spiritual laws’ that are frequently used when attempting to ‘save’ someone. These supposed four laws are never referred to as such by the Word, and they are not grouped together, but instead are sort of loosely based on a narrow translation of only parts of the Word. We overly complicate the process of salvation by adding our traditions to it. One who is saved is one who does what God says, pure and simple (John 14:15-15:19; 1 John 2:3). The addition of four spiritual laws, especially when the standard Christian teaching tries to eliminate God’s Laws, is hypocritical at best and an outright lie at the worst. We need to ‘exclude’ the tradition of adding to or subtracting from the Word of the Lord.

Examples of other current practices that I learned need to be excluded on this basis would be the placement of a decorated evergreen tree anywhere under our control; the use of

mistletoe; other images such as a crucifix or nativity scene; pagan names such as Easter (developed from Ishtar, a pagan god's name); the eating of pork or shellfish; sex outside of appropriate marriage; murder; and obvious pagan practices such as Halloween. No matter how 'innocent' the practice seems, it must be avoided. We must be holy as He is holy, and strive to do whatever we can with our heart, mind, and strength to follow God's ways and not our own. When we say that one of our practices is 'innocent,' after it is clearly denounced by the Word of God, then what we are really doing is putting ourselves in the place of God (a desire in man since the Garden), and saying that His Word is not right.

Notice that it appears I have placed such practices as avoiding pork or shellfish and the use of mistletoe alongside murder. However, it wasn't me who did this but God. Apparently, since all of His Words are equal and perfect, *any Word of His that we refuse to practice is 'falling short' of perfection and is equally sinful.* Even when we think of a tradition as 'innocent.' Of course He has different consequences for different types of disobedience, but the penalty that all sinfulness has in common is death (meaning any sin is worthy of that penalty, even the so-called 'innocent' ones). This shouldn't make us afraid to try and do what we know He wants us to do, but it should serve to get our attention and make sure we lift His Word up above our own. Praise Him that the death penalty has been paid for His children by His Son, so there is no fear of destruction if we slip up.

"On the other hand..."

What is Neutral. If God hasn't told us specifically in His Word what to do or what not to do, then the tradition is probably okay to practice. However, other instructions that God has given us still apply. As a matter of fact, this is what God charges us to do: apply all of His Word in balance all of the time. For instance, if a tradition resembles a pagan practice then it should also be avoided in the same way all other paganism is avoided (God tells us to avoid even the 'appearance' of evil, I Thessalonians 5:22). If a tradition that is otherwise '**neutral**' would cause a brother to stumble away from God's Word (the actual meaning of the word 'stumble' in the Bible), then it should be ditched in favor of a better tradition.

Paul covers **neutral** traditions in places such as Romans 14, only there he calls them 'disputatious matters.' The definition of a disputatious matter is something that is not specified in the Word. It does not mean arguments about the Word. If he was talking about arguments over the Word then we would have to throw out the whole Bible! The items Paul lists in the fourteenth chapter of Romans are not spelled out in the Word, but traditions that had grown up around the Word (eating vegetables only is never commanded). Romans 14:1 sets the tone for the chapter, where he says he is talking about men's opinions, not the Word of God.

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. Romans 14:1, NASB

Another way to translate ‘passing judgment’ is ‘making distinctions,’ such as treating someone who eats meat different than one who eats only vegetables. He reinforces this in other texts such as Colossians 2.

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence. Colossians 2:20-23, NASB

Paul tells us that the ‘elementary principles of the world’ are the ‘commandments and teachings of men.’ The teachings of men are not to be confused with the teachings of God. “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch” refer to extra-biblical ‘traditions’ that have been pasted on the plain teaching of God’s Word. They have the appearance of being ‘really holy,’ but they have no value against the flesh. God’s Word, however, will have value against the flesh. Teachings such as Paul’s were never intended to eliminate the Word of God, but to chip away the accumulated crust of centuries of men’s traditions.

Some examples of current practices that seem to be **neutral** are: the Protestant version of communion; the little hats (called kippahs pronounced key-pahs) that Jewish men wear; songs that don’t go against Scripture (even those that some call ‘secular’); gatherings or meetings on a particular day (not to be confused with the Sabbath rest, and excepting the instruction of ‘holy gatherings’ on feast days); the Jewish holidays of Hanukah or Purim; celebrating the birth of Jesus with a party but without pagan symbols, practices, or on traditional pagan days; the Jewish prayer shawl (talit); dancing (without sexual overtones); women’s head coverings and wearing dresses or skirts; mixing of dairy products and meat; drinking alcoholic beverages; formal prayers; smoking; and so on.

The Protestant communion or a birthday party for Jesus are included in the list of **neutral traditions**, but they are neutral only if we are also practicing the Biblical traditions of the feasts mentioned in Leviticus 23. We shouldn’t use a neutral tradition like communion to replace a Biblical one. Drinking to excess can be a health hazard (not to mention making it easier to sin) but drinking alcohol is not prohibited. A case could probably be made against smoking (for slavery or health reasons), but there is no instruction either way about it in the Word. Yet how many times do we look down on the smoker?

Do I have to? Basically, all instructions from God are voluntary, sort of, in the sense that He doesn’t stand over us with a stick and whack us when we don’t do the right thing.

But why would He have to do this with people who loved Him anyway? Saying, “I don’t have to” follow part of His Word is like saying “I don’t have to stop playing with matches” while standing in a puddle of gasoline. True, you can ‘light up’ if you want. But what kind of crazy notion is that for His children? He is God and there is none other, He is the source of Light and Life and Love, He is Reality itself, and we say “I don’t gotta?” Isn’t disconnection from reality the definition of ‘psychotic?’

Neutral traditions are even more voluntary. In my opinion God deliberately left some things open so we would learn the finer points of love. A neutral tradition is not a valid point of conflict for separation from the body of the Messiah (Jesus), and we cannot judge one another or make distinctions based on it. If it gets in the way of fellowship or between the Word and the world, we should really consider whether or not it is something to be practiced.

How then shall we live together? One of my teachers by the name of Tim Hegg goes over some good points in a four part article written for his synagogue newsletter called Chadashot, titled “Traditions: Some Thoughts On The Place of Tradition in Torah Communities.” Refer to it at www.torahresource.com/EnglishArticles/tradition.pdf. He comes to some conclusions for the development and place of tradition in a community.

1. Whenever traditional halakah would cause us to neglect a command of scripture, the traditional halakah must be rejected. (Note: halakah means ‘walk’ and describes a ruling or application of Scriptures.)
2. When two commandments or precepts of the Torah (God’s Instructions) come into conflict within a given situation of life, the commandment which fulfills the obligation to love one’s neighbor must take priority.
3. Never equate the traditions of man with having equal or more authority than the Scriptures.
4. Discard any and all traditions which in any way denigrate or diminish Torah commands or which are at odds with the clear teaching of God’s Word.
5. Allow those traditions to remain which are in line with Torah, and have proven themselves to be valuable in the pursuit of Torah living, whether on an individual or corporate level.
6. Remember that those traditions which we allow to remain are just that: traditions, something encouraged but not required.

(The parentheses are added for explanation.) I agree with Mr. Hegg and his conclusions. They form a good starting point for determining what to include and what to exclude from our traditions. We could possibly summarize these points into one precept my wife and I have been trying to live by: If it ain’t in There, it’s just opinion.

Traditions are not a bad thing, and I am not saying that anybody should get rid of everything that is not specifically in the Book, either. For instance, a lot of traditions were developed to help the Jewish people maintain their identity while dispersed in a

Gentile world, and they apparently accomplished that purpose. Many of the Jewish traditions are beautiful practices just loaded with meaning, and my family has adopted a few of them ourselves. Some of the practices help us to remember the Word, like Scripture set to music. I like how my friend Brad Scott of Wild Branch ministry puts it: Traditions are not bad; bad traditions are bad.

Judaism and Christianity have a number of traditions that are good in themselves, or good for identity, but seem to get in the way when trying to communicate God's Word. There is also an attitude that traditions are good just because they identify; a sort of superior mentality that complicates relationships. I am not an anti-Semite (or anti-Christian) by any stretch of the imagination. I have checked into moving my family to Israel, but cannot because of the laws. If I could I would volunteer to serve in the IDF (but they probably wouldn't want an old guy like me anyway). We continue to serve at a Christian church. We send money to Israel as often as we can. But I have to wonder if the Jews (in general) are communicating an anti-Gentile attitude sometimes, even if it is mostly unintentional (or understandable). Of course, the Christians have been communicating an anti-Jewish attitude for centuries.

“I know we are the chosen people, but once in a while couldn't you choose someone else?” Tevye, from the movie 'Fiddler on the Roof.'

When developing practices for a community or putting together an order of service, particularly when the community consists of a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, perhaps we should consider the purpose of the tradition. Or, more pointedly, what or who is the tradition for? If the purpose is to celebrate Jewish heritage, or teach it to your Jewish children, or reinforce Jewish unity, that is one thing. If Christians want to promote their version of the Kingdom, that is another thing. If you are trying to reach Jewish people with the message of the Messiah, then by all means be as Jewish as you can. But, if the purpose is to reach the broadest possible audience with the truth of God's Word including the Law, perhaps 'Jewishness' (or Christianity) is not the best focus. We might ask ourselves, Do we want to reach others with God's Word? All things Jewish (and all things Christian) are not necessarily good (or necessarily bad either). I am aware that there must be a certain temptation for the Jews to say 'I told you so' and to emphasize their own perspective as they take the lead (rightfully) in matters of faith once again. There is an equal temptation for the Christians to say the same concerning the Messiah. But the temptation to place 'Jewishness' or 'Christianity' at the forefront needs to be resisted, and instead the emphasis must be on God's Word.

In my opinion it is some of these attitudes that have caused other teachings to spring up such as the Two House doctrine. At least in part these teachings are a reaction to the 'shutting out' of the Torah observant person from many communities. This is done overtly by outright hate and covertly by way of reserving parts of God's Word

(specifically the Torah or Law) for Jews only. Or by the subtle segregation of Jew and Gentile (Christian) through selective application of tradition.

“A bird may love a fish, but where would they build a home together?” Tevye, from the movie ‘Fiddler on the Roof.’

To accept all of God’s Word, including the Law, is not necessarily to accept Jewishness or Christianity. The Remnant is not Jewish, and it is not Gentile (or Christian). It has Jewish members, just like it has Gentile members (and even some Christian members). All people ever created are under God’s rulership even though in rebellion, but not all people are part of His Remnant or Kingdom (especially not because of mere genetics). The Kingdom has many subjects from every tribe, nation and tongue, and no one individual or group is more important or loved than another. There are no natural children in the Kingdom – every single one of His kids is adopted. It is God’s Word that binds us together in Kingdom and family, and our collective doctrine and traditions should reflect it and reinforce it.

Some in the Messianic movement want to characterize the return to God’s Word (including Torah or the Law) as ‘discovering the Jewish roots of Christianity.’ Others teach that we (Gentiles) have been ‘grafted in to a Jewish root.’ The problem is, the roots of Christianity might be in Judaism, but the roots of believers (the Remnant) go much further back than just to the first century. They go all the way back at least to Abraham and perhaps even Abel or Adam. Also, the root we have been grafted into is not ‘Jewish’ but the eternally existent Messiah (even though He spent a few years as a Jewish person). I find no ‘Jews’ (and certainly no ‘Christians’) in the first five books of the Bible, either. Only Israel, which can be defined as all the people of God, those who follow His Ways. Let us not make Christian or Jewish the focus of our walk together, let us not fight over whose traditions are better, but let us rather lift up His Word, the Word in the Flesh and the Word on the page.

With all due respect to my buddy Tevye, it is not just any traditions that give us stability, but it is the traditions of the Word of God that stabilize us. Our feet are on firm ground if we take in His Word and practice His traditions. He is our Rock, our Fortress. His Word endures forever, and there is no change or shadow of turning in Him. Traditions can be wonderful things that help us understand His Word, promote unity, and condition our flesh to obedience, if they come from our Father. But if they are made up by men, however much they want to ‘help’ God by adding to or subtracting from His Word, they can be heavy burdens that make the Word of God unappealing to those who love Him.

“On the other hand...”

Shalom
Bruce S. Bertram