

No Tradition Of Man Is Accepted As Binding

by J. A. McNutt

The original meaning of the word "tradition" has to do with delivering something into the hands of another. In a religious sense it would refer to the delivery of opinions, doctrines, practices, rites and customs from generation to generation by oral communication. The Jewish nation subscribes to an unwritten code of laws said to have been given to Moses, but handed down by word of mouth from one generation to another by the rabbis, but not recorded in the Old Testament. Among the Moslems it would cover the sayings and acts attributed to Mohammed, which were not recorded in the Koran. Other religious bodies today have a mass of traditional teachings and practices which they have added to their worship and ceremonies which are never once mentioned in the New Testament.

TRADITION MAY BE GOOD OR BAD

The nature of tradition is not determined by its oral or written form alone, but by its original source and content. Is it from God or men? Is it Biblically correct or does it contradict the word of God? Is it from heaven or from men? Paul praised the Corinthians for holding fast the ordinances (traditions) which he had delivered (1 Corinthians 11:2). He is here speaking of divinely inspired instruction, for he says, "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you" (1 Cor. 11:23a).

Jesus condemned human tradition when it interfered with obedience to God, saying to the Jewish leaders, "thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition" (Matthew 15:6b). Again, our Lord said to the Pharisees, "Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own traditions" (Mark 7:9). Some religious bodies today reject the word of God and follow human traditions in their worship services.

REJECT HUMAN TRADITION

Being governed by a "Thus saith the Lord" and professing to "Speak where the Bible speaks and to be silent where it is silent," we cannot and will not accept the binding authority of human tradition. Paul told Titus to rebuke the church in Crete lest they should give heed to fables and the commandments of men, "that turn from the truth" (Titus 1:14-15). Again Paul wrote the church in Colossae saying, "Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, are ye subject unto ordinances (traditions), (Touch not; taste not; handle not; which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men?" (Col. 2:20-22). Have you observed certain so-called holy days from childhood? Were you baptized while still an infant? What about the rituals where you attend church? Are the traditional practices observed in churches today based on the word of God, or on human authority?

WHAT IS THE CHAFF TO THE WHEAT?

Jehovah inspired his prophet Jeremiah to issue some stern warnings to the false prophets, and to his people who were being deceived by them, in Jeremiah 23:28-29, "The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; but he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the Lord, Is not my word like a fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" It is not time today for dreams and fables when souls are dying, and mankind is hungering for the bread of life. Chaff is dead and lifeless, while the word of God pulsates with energy and saving power (Romans 1:16). Chaff is worthless but the word of God is living and powerful (Hebrews 4:12). A scientist can produce a grain of corn or wheat which seems to be identical with real grain, but he cannot inject the germ of life so that it will produce a living plant. Man can fabricate their dreams and proclaim their visions, but only faith in God and obedience to his gospel can save our souls (James 1:21; 1 Cor. 15:1-2).

THE PROBLEM OF ORAL TRADITION

We are aware that some claim that there is a body of inspired truth, spoken by Christ and endorsed by the apostles, which was never committed to writing. They tell us that these truths, although they were never committed to writing, have been handed down by word of mouth from the first century and are of equal authority with the written word in our New Testament. This theory of oral tradition poses a real problem when one considers how difficult it is for people to transmit a factual account around a room, much less an accurate message passed down through twenty centuries. How could such a message be reliable without each individual who passed it on being inspired? This would require continuing inspiration and special revelations. Of course we have had certain religious teachers who have claimed to be inspired, and claimed to be guided by the Holy Spirit. This, of course, conflicts with the Biblical claims of final and complete revelation (2 Peter 1:3). If we have all things that pertain to life and godliness as Peter affirms, and we do, what need would we have for present day revelation? Paul says, "That the man of God may be thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:16). And Jude speaks of the faith, "Which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). This does not leave any valid reason for continuing revelation, but another perplexing question arises. If these teachers today are guided by the Holy Spirit why do they contradict and condemn one another?

WHY BE BOUND BY HUMAN AUTHORITY?

Man-made traditions set up barriers to fellowship and set aside the authority of the Bible. Human tradition introduces its own laws and restrictions. It binds that which God has loosed, and looses that which God has bound. It is just as evil to be a law maker in the church as it is to be a law breaker. It is difficult to say which is the worse, but God condemns them both. We read of the Jews, who condemned the man whom Jesus had healed, because he had violated their traditions relative to Sabbath keeping, by carrying his bed (John 5:10). We are

told that they persecuted Jesus and sought to kill him because he violated their tradition. Although Jesus kept the will of his Father he refused to be bound by their authority. In turn, Jesus charged the Pharisees with having transgressed the commandment of God, relative to caring for their parents, by using an excuse based on tradition (Matt. 15:3-6).

TRADITIONS CAN CORRUPT GOD'S WAY

Man-made tradition has often opened the flood gates to hundreds of innovations. These innovations have corrupted and changed the government of the church, and altered the doctrinal stance of the church as well. In an article in the Gospel Advocate of April 16, 1981, p. 243, Jim E. Waldron writes, "At this present stage in history, the 'Christianity' that most people see is covered with so much tapestry from the dark ages, so much hair-splitting from the various sects, so much infidelity from the modernistic theologians and so much Judaism from the Sabbatarians that the average man despairs to find the simple life of a disciple whose only desire is to serve the humble Man from Galilee. People are generally more upset by being shown that their traditions are wrong than they are when God and the Bible are attacked. Concerning Easter for example, one finds that to criticize the Easter festival is considered by many to be virtually blasphemous, when in reality the term 'Easter' comes from an ancient, mythological Anglo-Saxon goddess, 'Estre' (New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language, p. 273). The Easter celebration is based upon tradition and not Scripture." Similar statements could be truthfully made relating to the observance in the church of Lent, Christmas and certain other so-called holy days.

NOT A LAW MAKING BODY

It is not within the power or province of the church to make laws or by-laws, to amend or change, to add too, or subtract from the revealed will of God. The church of our Lord is an absolute monarchy with Christ as King of kings, and Lord of lords, All power is vested in Christ the head of the church, and all authority is his both in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18-19). The church exists to proclaim the gospel and to execute the will of her Lord. The enactment of laws and decrees is not left to the discretion of the church. Professor John L. Girardeau, of Columbia Theological seminary, in his book (Instrumental Music In Public Worship, p. 24) says, "The principle of the discretionary power of the church in regard to things not commanded by Christ in his word, was the chief fountain from which flowed the gradually increasing tide of corruptions that swept the Latin church into apostasy from the gospel of God's grace. And as surely as causes produce their appropriate effects, and history repeats itself in obedience to that law, any Protestant church which embodies that principle in its creed is destined, sooner or later, to experience a similar fate." Remember, it was our Lord who said, "In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9).