

Attitude to a Traditional Church

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Let us start with some verses from our Bible, first in Matthew and then in 1 Corinthians.

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.' He answered them, 'And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, "Honour your father and mother," and, "Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die." But you say, "If anyone tells his father or his mother, 'What you would have gained from me is given to God,' he need not honour his father.'" So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said, "This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'" And he called the people to him and said to them, 'Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.' Then the disciples came and said to him, 'Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?' He answered, 'Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.' (Matt 15:1-14)

Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. (1 Cor 11:2)

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you. (1 Cor 11:23)

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. (1 Cor 15:3-4)

May God give us good understanding of his holy word.

Introduction

I would like to think with you this afternoon about the part which tradition plays in the life of individuals and the church of God. We cannot long be converted to the Lord Jesus Christ and joined to a Christian church, but that we find we are involved in a great deal of tradition. Sooner or later, if we have active minds that wish to enquire the reason for things, we will be asking ourselves what attitude we ought to take to this great mass of tradition. Do we take the view that a tradition is to be received because it is of longstanding, and unquestionably followed and obeyed? Or do we take the view that tradition is mere tradition and, by that

token, must be rejected and thrown away, and everything started afresh? In a word, what are we to do with the great mass of tradition which we soon find ourselves confronted with?

The answer is not quite so simple as might first appear. There are differing kinds of traditions. In the first place, there is that tradition which is absolutely authoritative, must not be questioned (though it must be understood), must be received unswervingly and obeyed; because the tradition concerned comes from God Almighty, from our blessed Lord Jesus Christ and from his holy apostles. There is another kind of tradition which doesn't come from God, nor from the Lord Jesus, nor yet from the holy apostles, but comes simply from men. There we shall have to pause and think very carefully. For if that tradition which comes from men goes contrary to the word of God, we have no choice but to reject it totally and forthwith. But there is a third class of tradition which does not come from God nor yet from our Lord, nor yet from the holy apostles, but on the other hand is not contrary to the word of God. That tradition we shall have to treat with respect and use it where it is profitable and change it where it is unprofitable.

'Tradition' defined

What do we mean by *tradition*? Well, the word tradition simply means something that has been handed down from somebody to somebody else. That's all it means. But generally it acquires the associated idea that this thing which has been handed down—simply by dint of being handed down over many times and years—has gathered to itself some kind of authority. The basic question that we ought then to ask about any tradition is, first and foremost, where did it start? From whom has it come? Someone handed it down to somebody else, and he to a third person, but in that chain of tradition, what was the first link, where did the thing start?

Scriptural traditions

a) The gospel 'tradition'

You will remember that Paul himself calls Timothy's attention to this matter of the source of tradition. He says,

Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it. (2 Tim 3:14)

Timothy is asked to persevere in the traditions that have been taught him because he is aware of the authoritative source from which those traditions come. We should always stand our sentinel on guard at this very point, ready to challenge every tradition at its root. Who said so? From where does the tradition come? We shall find that there are many traditions which are good and authoritative, and which must be obeyed implicitly and never be changed because the tradition starts with Jesus Christ our Lord and comes to us directly from him or through his apostles.

Let us notice the passage from which we were reading just now. The very gospel message which is the basis of our salvation, through which we are saved, is pictured to us in holy Scripture as a tradition. Listen to what Paul says to us,

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures. (1Cor 15:1–3)

The gospel—the basic message by which we are saved—is a Christian tradition. ‘I received it,’ says Paul. ‘I passed it on to you.’ That’s what we mean by a tradition.

But let’s examine the matter more closely. Let’s put our sentinel on guard and say, ‘Paul, tell us where you got the tradition from? You say you received it. Where did you receive it from?’ And he answers our question in many of his letters. In Galatians 1:1, for instance, he tells us that he is ‘an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father’. He tells us again that when he first was saved, he did not immediately consult with anyone but went into Arabia before returning to Damascus (vv. 16–17). He tells us that when at last he went up to Jerusalem, those who were influential ‘added nothing to me’ (2:6).

Why does he say all this? Because Paul is exceedingly concerned to let us see just where he got the tradition of the gospel from. He got it direct from the risen Lord. So the chain of tradition is this, from Christ to Paul, from Paul to us—the basic tradition of the gospel. ‘I would remind you,’ says Paul, ‘to hold fast the very words I preached.’ For the gospel is not some vague message to the effect that God is love, for instance, though that is blessedly true, but the gospel is a detailed message and if you would be solidly in this apostolic tradition and preach the gospel, you must maintain the very detail of that gospel.

It is this, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he rose again the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. In that brief summary, you will notice two important things. You will notice the great historic events that lie at the basis of the gospel, how that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he rose again the third day. But you will notice also that Paul tells us that when Christ died for our sins, he died ‘in accordance with the Scriptures’. He is talking about the Old Testament Scriptures. When he rose again the third day, he rose again ‘in accordance with the Scriptures’. He is talking about the Old Testament Scriptures. In other words, the Christian tradition of the gospel embraces not only the great historical facts of Christ’s death, his burial and his resurrection, but it embraces that older revelation which we nowadays call the Old Testament. You cannot have one without the other. If you would be true to the gospel of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ, you must be true to that older tradition which is the Old Testament. Here then is a precious tradition. We must guard it as though we were called upon to guard it with our very lives.

But not only have we received that basic gospel from our Lord through Paul the apostle and the other apostles, we must be wary of reinterpreting it in modern terms which contradict what Paul himself taught us. I remember a learned teacher I had in my youth. When he died, I was trying to help his widow tidy up his estate. She said to me, ‘I shall never see Peter any more.’ That was her husband. I was startled, because the dear man claimed to be a Christian.

I said, ‘But don’t you believe in the resurrection?’

‘No, I don’t believe in the resurrection. Nor did my husband. And my father was a bishop, and he didn’t either.’

'But if you don't believe in the resurrection, there is no gospel. For Paul tells us that if Christ has not risen from the dead, you are yet in your sins. Our preaching and our faith is in vain. There's nothing in it at all.'

She said, 'No, my husband used to tell me that if Paul were around today, he'd put it in different terms.'

Would he really? So if Paul were around today, he'd say the very opposite of what he used to? But Paul has anticipated the matter and he tells us straight, in that chapter from which we have read, that if there is no resurrection, then Christ has not been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith also is in vain. And what is more, Paul says that if there is no resurrection, we have been misrepresenting God because we have witnessed concerning God that he raised up Christ. And if God didn't raise up Christ, then we apostles are liars.

'So I remind you,' says Paul to these Corinthians, 'of the very words I used. Don't you go changing my words.' It's not just a general, vague kind of a message. If you would be true to the gospel, you must have it in the very words that Paul used. And you must not reinterpret him so that you make him contradict what he wrote earlier and you turn him into a liar.

b) The tradition of the Lord's supper

Then let us notice that it is not merely the basic gospel that is described as a tradition. Other things are so described, especially that holy and blessed memory which we call the Lord's Supper. Listen again to what its authority is. Says Paul in 1 Corinthians 11, 'I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you' (v. 23). Notice the tradition. Paul says, 'I got it from Christ. Christ gave it to me and I hand it on to you.' There is the chain of tradition. So the Lord's Supper comes to us as a command, with all the authority of Christ. He gave it to his apostles who sat round the table with him in the upper room; and now, if we comprehend here what Paul says, he gave it afresh to Paul, 'I received it from the Lord.' It is a holy privilege. We should never forget as we meet for that holy and happy supper, that we are in the presence of the Lord and head of the church. As he bids us take part in the celebration of his new covenant, he would have us feel the whole weight of his divine authority.

A week or so ago I had some pleasant discussion with some young Christian folks who had been caught up in a kind of doctrine which, when it is taken to its extremes, tells dear Christian folks that they needn't keep the Lord's Supper because it was merely for the interim period of the Acts of the Apostles. As part of their prophetic scheme of things they will tell believers of this present day that they don't need to get baptized, and they don't need to keep the Lord's Supper. In fact, if you were really intelligent, you would see that you belong to a different dispensation and, therefore, it's a mark of great spirituality that you get yourself neither baptized nor keeping the Lord's Supper. We may have mercy on the young folks who are beguiled by the skilful arguments of those that propound such views, but we must be utterly unmerciful on their theories. 'I received from the Lord,' says Paul, 'what I delivered to you.' We must not dare to break that chain of tradition. It comes from the Lord himself.

c) The tradition of headship

In chapter 11, Paul says similarly, 'I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. But I want you to understand

that the head of every man is Christ' (vv. 2–3). There are three sets of symbols that our Lord has given, and between them they cover the wide range of his work. There is the Lord's Supper in which we remember and, by the elements, symbolize his death upon the tree—the bread and the wine symbolizing his death for ourselves. There is baptism which speaks to us not merely of our Lord's death, but also of our Lord's resurrection; and our identity with him in his burial and in his resurrection. Then there is this other symbol, that when the church meets, men folks don't veil themselves. You say, 'What's that a symbol of?' That's a symbol of the lordship and the headship of Jesus Christ. The head of every man is Christ. It would be a sad business, wouldn't it, if Christian gentlemen took to wearing veils when they met together in the church.

You say, 'But don't be so absurd.' I'm not being absurd. In the ancient world, Roman men veiled their heads when they prayed to their god. And if you went down to the Jewish synagogue in Belfast and watched the men at prayers, you would find that they would cover their heads. You see, the Jew does not believe in the lordship of Jesus. He doesn't believe that our blessed Lord has risen and ascended to the right hand of God. He does not accept his headship. And when he prays, he will veil his head in the presence of almighty God. We Christian men do believe that Jesus is risen and ascended to God's right hand. We come to God through our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a divinely given tradition, mark the word—a tradition that comes from the Lord via the apostles—that Christian men shall leave their heads unveiled when publicly they come to pray. You say, 'There's no danger of us breaking that tradition.' The Lord be praised for that!

We have been thinking of traditions that are good and must be accepted; and because they come from the Lord to us through his holy apostles, not only accepted, but passed on. We are to stand fast for 'the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude v. 3). As Paul put it to Timothy, we in our generation are to commit it to faithful men who, in turn, will take the chain further and be able to communicate it to others (2 Tim 2:2).

Unscriptural traditions

Now, let's go over to the other side, to tradition which is bad. Bad because, in the first place, it doesn't come from the Lord and, in the second place, it contradicts the word of God and runs counter to it. We read from Matthew how that our Lord when he was here on earth, ran into a great deal of trouble from tradition. On one particular occasion, the Pharisees got themselves sorely upset because our Lord chose to disregard completely the tradition of the elders. In Mark's account of that same incident, our Lord gives us three things about this bad tradition that explain to us why it is so bad, and why it must be discarded. He says to the Jews as follows (see Mark 7:8–13):

You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.

You reject the commandment of God that you may establish your tradition!

You make void the word of God by your tradition.

You'll notice that those things get progressively worse. In the first place, they simply leave the commandment of God. They leave it aside somewhere, and away they go to keep

something which is different. But not only that, when they find that the word of God conflicts with their tradition, they reject the word of God in order that they may keep their tradition. Finally, and worst of all, they make the word of God void by their tradition—they cancel it out and make it of none effect, or contradict it. That is a most solemn thing to do.

Infant baptismal regeneration

Let us take a simple and often discussed example of it to show what those steps mean. Let's take that outrageous matter of infant baptismal regeneration. The Bible tells us, with a tradition that comes from our Lord Jesus Christ himself, that when folks repent and trust the Saviour, they are to be baptized. Our Lord thus commissioned his apostles on the mountain before he ascended. 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt 28:19). Had Peter been the man who led you to Christ, he wouldn't have left it optional. He wouldn't have said in your ear, 'Now that you've found the Saviour, you might consider one of these days perhaps whether you care to be baptized.' No, not Peter. With his apostolic authority he would have said, 'Now I command you to be baptized.' Peter hadn't any option in the matter. The Lord had commanded him so, as a good and true apostle, he commanded his converts. Thus he did, for instance, to Cornelius, and commanded him to be baptized (see Acts 10:48).

Somewhere along the succeeding centuries, people began to alter things. They began to apply baptism to new-born infants. The first thing they did was to leave the positive command of Scripture to carry out this other idea. That was the first false step. Secondly, they then said, 'If you've been baptized as an infant, you don't need to be baptized as an adult.' Oh dear. So they've not only left the commandment of God, but now they are contradicting the commandment of God. And worse was to follow. For then they went further and they made void a certain basic Scripture. Our Lord Jesus has solemnly affirmed that, except a man be born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Very solemn, and it's absolutely basic. These folks not only left the commandment of God to keep their tradition, but by their tradition they have contradicted our Lord's original command about baptism, and they are prepared to make void that solemn word that you must be born again. They tell folks that if they've been through some ceremony, albeit unconsciously, they have been born again. They make void the word of God.

'That is a simple matter,' you say, 'why bring up that old hoary chestnut?' Well, it is simple, of course. But those who are younger in our day and generation must learn to be warned by these earlier faults of men who built up their own tradition, but it was a bad tradition for the reasons given by God. And we must examine all the traditions that are around us, and check them in that same manner. Whatever we find that contradicts God's holy word, we must reject. You say, 'Mr Preacher, you're talking about things that don't really concern us this afternoon. We've always been clear on such matters.' Yes, but we shouldn't think that we ourselves necessarily are free of traditions that need to be adjusted. Well, perhaps you are, but I have discovered in my own life the need to examine traditions in which I was brought up.

The church and the kingdom

I hope you don't think I'm especially odd, but I was brought up in a tradition of interpretation which taught me that the kingdom has nothing to do with the church and the church has nothing to do with the kingdom. So if you had found me at the age of sixteen or so, I would have held it as a biblical doctrine. I thought it very good to pray, 'Come, Lord Jesus.' I thought it very bad to pray, 'Thy kingdom come.' In fact, in the church where I was brought up, if I had dared to pray, 'Thy kingdom come,' I would nearly have been excommunicated! It was part of a tradition of prophetic interpretation which they held. I'm not going to argue the pros and cons for that this afternoon, merely to tell you what happened when I got searching Scripture.

I got searching my New Testament epistles in all innocence one day, and came across a phrase like this, 'For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom 14:17). I said, 'What was that? The kingdom? No, it can't be that. That's got nothing to do with me. That surely must be Jewish.' And then I rubbed my eyes and looked again at the top of the page in my Bible and it said 'Romans'! Well, I thought, that's odd, Paul writing to Romans, Gentiles, and talking about the kingdom? Well, perhaps it was just a little quirk that you could ignore. So on I went and came to 1 Corinthians, and I heard the apostle say rather sternly, 'For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power' (1Cor 4:20). I said, 'The kingdom of God'—what has that got to do with the Corinthians, who are mostly Greeks? And then, as I read on in Colossians, I discovered that God's marvellous grace in the gospel has delivered me from the domain of darkness and transferred me to 'the kingdom of his beloved Son' (Col 1:13). I thought that was an unhappy phrase on Paul's part, but could it be? Here it was saying I was in the kingdom of his dear Son. And then I found a quite unrepentant Paul telling us the names of those who were his fellow workers 'for the kingdom of God' (Col 4:11).

So provoked by such things, I got out my concordance and began to think whatever this might mean. But I can't forget what happened when I took it to a certain senior Christian in my church, and started to talk to him about the kingdom. I said, 'What's this all about the kingdom in the Epistles?'

'Oh, that's Jewish,' he said.

'But it can't be really be, can it?' I said.

Well, I'd better not tell you what followed then, but I was firmly put in my place and warned that anybody who had thought about these things had generally ended up in heresy. How very odd, but I think I understand now how that good man felt about me. He had accepted without thinking a tradition of interpretation that said the church had nothing to do with the kingdom and somehow or other they had bypassed or taken no notice of these references in the Epistles. When a little upstart like me came along and called them out, I was challenging his whole scheme of interpretation.

You say, 'Does it matter?' Yes, it matters. I was brought up to believe that the Sermon on the Mount had nothing to do with the church whatsoever, because it was kingdom truth. Well, if the church has got nothing to do with the kingdom then, of course, the Sermon on the Mount has got nothing to do with the church. But if they are wrong to say the church has got nothing

to do with the kingdom, then it would be a very serious thing to tell Christian folks that the Sermon on the Mount has nothing to do with them. Listen to what our Lord said about it.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 5:17–19)

If I were to dare to tell anybody that these commandments in the so-called Sermon on the Mount don't apply to us and therefore we needn't keep them, then hear what our Lord says. If I taught anybody that they needn't keep even the least of those commandments I will be called least in the kingdom of God.

I quote this merely as an illustration, but we do need from time to time to examine our systems of interpretation. As a general principle, we need to stand firm by what holy Scripture actually and explicitly says. What Scripture says is absolutely right and I must believe it. As for my system of doctrine and interpretation, let's hope that a good deal of it is right, but there's no guarantee it's all right. So my systems of interpretation must continually be brought to the bar of God's holy word and there tested and examined, and where it is proven that they do not rightly interpret God's word, then my system of interpretation must be changed.

Other traditions

Finally, there are some traditions that don't go back to God nor Christ, nor the apostles, but they're not necessarily bad. They're not necessarily good, but then they're not necessarily bad. Traditions then which, if they are helpful, let us use them. If they are not helpful, let us discard them. You say, 'What kind of things are they?' Well, if you came on a Sunday morning to the church that I belong to now, you would find that at the Lord's Supper we have a very curious tradition. Virtually every one of us sits in the same seat every Sunday morning. I've been sitting in the same seat ever since I came to Belfast! It is very odd, but we all do it. Well, there are a few brave spirits who don't. They go off somewhere else, and they hop around the place, but almost all of us sit exactly in the same seat. We've got no Scripture for it. It isn't the command of the Lord, nor have we got any command from the apostles. And the odd thing is that when it comes to the gospel meetings in the evening, we sit where we like! But on Sunday mornings, same seat!

You say, 'That's a mere tradition. Let's scrap it.' Why scrap it? It's a jolly convenient tradition. Imagine all one hundred and fifty of us coming in five minutes before the meeting time. If we had to decide afresh every Sunday where we were going to sit, there would be quite a bit of confusion. No, it's a very happy tradition. We all each have our own place, and with a minimum of fuss and difficulty, we can all go and quietly sit. I don't see any reason for scrapping it, though if you think my seat's more comfortable and you want to sit there, I shall give it to you!

That's a trifling little example, but what about the Lord's Supper itself? How many verses of Scripture are there that tell us exactly what we've got to do at the Lord's Supper? How

much of what we do is actually explicitly told us in Scripture, and how much is simply a tradition that has grown up? We are to break the bread, we are to drink the wine. But are we to let three-quarters of an hour go by before we do it? Well, there's no rule about that in Scripture. And where does it say in the New Testament that it is a worship meeting? But you say, 'Isn't it very appropriate that at the Lord's Supper we should worship?' Very appropriate indeed, and may God maintain it. For who can think about those symbols and what they represent without his heart being provoked to worship.

But as you will observe, there is no command that says that when you keep the Lord's Supper, you must engage in a period of worship and you mustn't sing any gospel hymns. I do remember once gathering with some believers who had only recently seen the truth of keeping the Lord's Supper: they were doing it for only about the third or fourth time in all their lives. It was a marvellous discovery for them. They discovered that they were to meet together and break bread and drink wine to remember the Lord. The only hymnbook they had consisted of gospel hymns, so the hymns we sang that morning were all glorious gospel hymns! It didn't contradict any Scripture I know of.

Conclusion

What am I saying? I'm saying this, that there are traditions that grow up which have no scriptural authority. They're not necessarily bad for that. They may be the product of much experience and much spiritual wisdom. Those of us who are younger would be stupid just to charge in and say, 'You've no Scripture for that. Scrap it.' On the other hand, those of us who are older should remember to distinguish between what is absolutely basic and biblical, and what is merely a tradition which, however helpful, may not always be helpful in every circumstance, and if needs require, can be changed.

And so the Lord bless his word. May he fill our hearts with a great sense of history so that we maintain that great link of tradition which goes back to Christ. What a lovely thing it is to sit at his Supper and realize how many Sundays have gone by since he himself first handed that cup to his followers. And thus it has been done, unbrokenly, down the course of history. God make us faithful to his holy traditions, and God give us grace to test all else by his word. What contradicts his word, let us reject it. What is neither bad nor good, but simply convenient, let us use it as it is helpful. Let us change it where it needs to be changed.

The Lord bless us, for his name's sake.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.