

Traditions VS Doctrine #1

By Bill Denton

INTRODUCTION

A. Illustration

The story is told about the mother who was teaching her little girl how to prepare a ham and cook it. “First, you cut off the end of the ham, then put it into roasting pan. Set the oven and then check it later to see if you need to cover it so the very top won’t burn. Now, any questions?” “Yes,” said the daughter, “Why did you cut off the end of the ham?” “Well. . .” the mother paused, “I don’t know. That’s how I learned to do it.”

So they called Grandma. “Why did you cut off the end of the ham before you cooked it? That’s how I always remember you doing it.” “Well,” said grandma, “That’s how my mother taught me how to do it.”

So they called great-grandma, a very old lady. “Great-grandma, why did you teach grandma to cut off the end of the ham before you cooked it?” asked the little great-granddaughter. “Well,” great-grandma explained, “Because the only roasting pan I had was too short for the ham, so I always cut it off to make it fit in the pan.”

B. That little story is an old one, but represents some truth about how many of us learn to Do things – it’s really the story of a little family tradition

1. We live in interesting times for religion
 - a. on the one hand, there are many who are throwing off their religious traditions because they are learning to go back and re-examine things for themselves and understand their faith
 - b. on the other hand, others are pleading for us to maintain religious traditions because they help provide secure footing, help us understand who we are and where we came from, and provide a framework for life and worship
 - c. others are just confused, and all the debate over traditions, both pro and con, leave them wondering if anything is worth all the fuss
2. Among churches of Christ, we are currently going through this very thing
 - a. there are some among us who get identified as “change agents” who seem to want us to throw away all our religious traditions, modernize our worship and the way we do things, and basically live in the 21st century
 - b. others are wary of any change, and think that changing traditions is a threat to our identity and the ‘settled’ matters that have made us who we are
 - c. the discussion often gets framed as a competition or conflict between tradition and doctrine – but we need to distinguish between the two for they are not necessarily in conflict with one another
 - 1) a tradition is something handed down – it might be based on doctrine, but it might not be either; traditions are usually ways of doing things
 - 2) a doctrine is something actually taught – in the case of the church, a doctrine is something actually taught in scripture

C. We need to learn both how to distinguish one from the other, but we need to understand the Relative importance and value of each one

1. Today and next Sunday, we'll take a brief look at traditions and doctrines
2. We won't be able to settle all the questions and discussion, but perhaps I can point you in a direction that will prove helpful

I. THE BASIC MESSAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT IS THAT TRADITIONS ARE DANGEROUS AND MUST BE PRACTICED WITH GREAT CARE

A. Hear that statement with a sense of balance

1. Not all traditions or customs are bad
 - a. Luke 4:16 -- And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. NASU
 - b. Acts 17:2 -- And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, NASU
2. The problem is when traditions become ends in themselves, and override even the will of God upon which they might be based

B. There are two important passages that show us the danger, not just of traditions, but of Traditionalism – where the emphasis is not on God or his will, though such is often claimed, Rather it is on observing the forms, the ceremonies, the outward observances but without The heart, without the spirit of the matter being foremost

1. Mt 15:1-9 (read)
2. Mt 23:13-36 (read)

C. Traditionalists are always in danger of doing some things they probably would never admit To being their intent

1. Traditionalists set aside God's word for the sake of their tradition
 - a. Mark 7:8 -- Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." NASU
 - b. Mark 7:13 -- thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that." NASU
 - c. No self-respecting Pharisee would have ever claimed to be doing that, but they were blind to the problem they had created for themselves – they had created conflicts where none needed to exist
2. Traditionalists give lip service to God, yet his heart is far from God
 - a. Isaiah 29:13 -- Then the Lord said, "Because this people draw near with their words And honor Me with their lip service, But they remove their hearts far from Me, And their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote,
 - b. no Pharisee would have thought they were doing this, yet this was Jesus' statement of their problem

- c. their religion looked good from the outside, but actually it was more of what they wanted to do, to give, ways they wanted to act and not really God's will

3. Traditionalists worship and maintain all the forms, but the heart is missing

- a. John 4:24 -- God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. NASU
- b. Matthew 15:17-20 -- "Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man. NASU
- c. again, the emphasis was on the form, but not the meaning, not that which touched the spirit of the individual

4. Traditionalists actually teach that observing the tradition equates to keeping God's commandments

- a. Matt 7:21-23 -- "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.' NASU
- b. Mark 7:7-8 -- 'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.' Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." NASU

D. It seems clear then, that when it comes to traditions, though they are not necessarily good Or bad, we need to beware lest traditionalism replace faith

- 1. It was a problem for the Pharisee
- 2. It can become a problem for Christians

II. ARE WE IN DANGER FROM TRADITIONS TODAY

A. Of course!

- 1. One of the reasons for the danger is that when we become traditionalists, tradition looks like doctrine, and doctrine looks like something else (listen carefully to understand the next few points)
 - a. we love a handy little shortcut that was invented as a teaching tool
 - b. H-B-R-C-B – each ticked off on a finger of one hand, and we've used it for the gospel (letters stand for: hear, believe, repent, confess, be baptized)
 - c. only problem is that what has become a traditional method of teaching can leave the one being taught ignorant of what they really need to know

2. How we worship is another area full of tradition
 - a. are you aware that there isn't a passage anywhere in the New Testament that even gives us an example of what the early church did as far as a complete assembly is concerned? Fact: the 'how' of worship isn't prescribed
 - b. are you aware that the style of our singing today is completely different from what they practiced in the early church – four part harmony is really a rather new invention
 - c. are you aware that our practice of meeting for Sunday school, then meeting for a morning assembly, then being dismissed for most of the day only to return for another assembly on Sunday evening is more tradition than Bible?
 - d. are you aware that our practice of the Lord's supper involves some tradition that isn't necessarily wrong, but reflects a way we've chosen to serve the bread and the fruit of the vine
 - 1) I'm talking about the form in which the elements are served – small cups and, for us, two forms of unleavened bread
 - 2) our practice of having men come to the front of the auditorium to serve the bread and fruit of the vine is based more on our architecture than on any specified way serving the Lord's supper
 - e. how we have things scheduled, our 'program' of worship, is much more our tradition than anything else -- in fact, our whole assembly is marked through and through with tradition
 - f. do you hear in any of that a criticism or that I'm suggesting that we ought to change anything – if so, you may be locked more into our tradition than into God's will

B. The very fact that we have traditions is one reason there is such conflict in the church today

1. It causes some to struggle with an emphasis on externals while they seek for a meaning that touches the spirit
2. It causes some to see a conflict between what they perceive to be outward rules and regulations that leave untouched the hearts of people
3. It is why to some, there appears to be a demand for allegiance to ritual and ceremony, while they are looking for a way to connect with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior
4. It is why some become confused and frustrated by the difficulty in sorting out what is tradition and what is doctrine, what is indispensable and what can be changed

C. Believe it or not, the problems we often face are those created by people on both sides putting Too much emphasis on traditions and missing the important doctrines

1. In many churches there is conflict and dissention and argument over which set of traditions they will follow
2. In many churches, stagnation after wallowing in long-practiced traditions, acts almost like quicksand, preventing people from experiencing renewal through an emphasis on doctrine
3. In many churches, the struggle pits younger Christians against older Christians in a tug-of-war over traditions, not over what the Bible actually says
4. Any church that experiences serious growth will probably also experience some conflict along the way simply because new Christians will likely come from backgrounds where both the doctrines and the traditions differ from what older Christians are accustomed to

D. This is why it is so important for a healthy, spiritually mature church to know the difference Between what is doctrinal and what is traditional

1. If it's doctrinal, it is something the Bible actually teaches us to believe or practice
2. If it's traditional, it is something we've become accustomed to doing, in a way that helps us in our belief or practice, but itself is not necessarily the issue
3. Doctrines are always important and right, they are what we are to believe and do because they are God's commands, or because they are what scripture teaches as vital to our faith and practice
4. In traditions, we are usually talking about the forms that our worship take, or the particular ways we put things together to help us develop a sense of identity and to make sense of what we understand God wants from us
5. Doctrines are essential, while traditions may change frequently, or remain in place for decades

CONCLUSION

A. Today, I simply want you to be aware of a few things

1. The difference between doctrines and traditions, at least in a general sense
2. That traditions can be dangerous when they take the place of doctrines
3. That we need to become aware of which is which in our own lives, in the practices of our congregation, and come to grips with the fact that our unity must be based on doctrine, but it will be expressed through traditions

B. Next week we will look at more specifics, and some recently debated doctrines that must not Become confused with mere tradition

C. Invitation