

## Tradition of the Elders

*Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem, saying, Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread. And He answered and said to them, Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? ...you have deprived the word of God of its authority because of your tradition. Hypocrites! Well has Isaiah prophesied concerning you, saying, "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart stays far away from Me; But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as teachings the commandments of men." (Matthew 15:1-9)*

It is easy to fall into the "tradition of the elders." It happens slowly over time based on an appreciation of those who have gone before. It is imperceptible to those who have so fallen. The Pharisees and scribes who came to Jesus in the passage quoted above had no idea the foolishness of their question.

They asked, "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders?" The Pharisees and scribes had long accepted tradition as their guide. The elders who had gone before them were mature. They were godly. They had always washed their hands when they ate bread. Whatever they did must be God's will and a pattern for us all. The Pharisees did not even try to quote the Word of God to support their complaint. The only support they offered was their tradition. It was inconceivable to them that this would not be adequate.

The Lord responded, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?" This is a great warning. It is possible to transgress God's commandments by keeping our tradition. No matter how godly the "elder" was or how much we still respect him today, his personal actions and practices can in no way replace the authority of the Scriptures.

In the parallel passage in Mark 7, the Lord said, "You nicely set aside the commandment of God that you may keep your tradition.... Thus you deprive the word of God of its authority by your tradition" (vv. 9, 13a). Often these traditions "nicely," or conveniently, allow us to set aside the Scriptures, albeit unconsciously. The spiritual "elder" who set the precedent by his personal practice may have never intended this "setting aside." He simply exercised according to his own understanding and conscience. But those who later codify what he did into a tradition for others to follow inevitably produce this negative result.

The Lord went on to say, "you have deprived the word of God of its authority because of your tradition. Hypocrites!" (Matt. 15:6b-7a) What a strong word! To pretend you are godly when you are actually following the traditions of men is indeed hypocritical. Such ones pick and choose the practices they want from the "elders" with no regard to the clear Word of God. This results in religious legality concerning practices that violates the consciences of many.

Today there are a number of teachings and practices being presented to us that fit this category. We are being asked to follow and support them not because they are taught in the Bible, but because there were the practices of our “elders,” Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. Since we all have such respect for these men, the desire to emulate their practices comes naturally. It is when they are insisted upon that they become damaging traditions.

What are examples of this? Here are four.

- We are told that brothers Nee and Lee practiced “one publication,” and because of this history, it has somehow become an “organic practice” that we must all keep. Only what is approved by LSM should now be published and read. But what is the Biblical support for such a practice? Regardless how hard we search, no such teaching can be found in the Bible. The only support offered is the “tradition of the elders.”
- We are all expected to attend the “seven annual feasts.” What is the basis for this expectation? It was in Brother Lee’s “will.” (There is some dispute over how many feasts he actually said, but that in no way affects the point being made here.) There is no New Testament precedent for such a demand.
- We are told that there should be only one global work and one global company of workers, all under the “coordinated oversight” of the “Blended Brothers.” Any other work is in competition to the “one work” and destroys the oneness of the Body of Christ. We are told to accept this because it was Brother Lee’s way. However, the New Testament pattern is actually contrary to this, showing multiple companies of workers that in no way competed with one another. Rather, they operated under the Lord’s principle, *“Do not forbid him, for there is no one who will do a work of power in My name and be able soon to speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is for us”* (Mark 9:39-40).
- Brother Witness Lee brought a lawsuit against a book that slandered his ministry. He claimed that this action was justified by the Apostle Paul’s appeal to Caesar to save his life as recorded in Acts 25:11. Based on this tradition, it seems today that lawsuits of any kind are justified. It is as though the Apostle Paul had never written 1 Corinthians 6:1-8. Brothers willingly sue one another, having no protest in their conscience. Witness today the suit brought against the church in Columbus, Ohio, and the property grab for the meeting hall in Mansfield, Ohio, both backed by extra-local advice and money.

Those who have a portion of God’s New Testament Ministry should bring us to God, to Christ, to the Spirit, and to the Bible. They should never bring us to their own practices, exercises, or “will.” If they were to do so, they would disqualify themselves from being New Testament ministers. When those who follow them hold up their practices, exercises, or “will” as a standard instead of the Bible, they insult and degrade such servants of God.

But even more, whenever something not found in the Bible is insisted upon, many will be torn in their conscience. It makes no difference that it was once practiced by a godly man whom everyone respects. The Biblical principle will always be, “One believes that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables” (Rom 14:2). Paul goes on to say, “But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because it is not out of faith; for all that is not out of faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). Thus by insisting on an unbiblical “tradition of the elders,” the conscience of some is violated. If they follow the tradition instead of their conscience, they sin. If they follow their conscience instead of the tradition, they are condemned. “For if because of food your brother is wounded, you no longer walk according to love. Do not destroy by your food that man for whom Christ died” (Rom 14:15). The blame for that destruction lies with the ones who insist on the unbiblical tradition.

It seems that the conscience of some saints has become so seared by the tradition of suing that they do not care how unrighteous their actions are. They freely and openly stand against their elders and rob their fellow believers, whom they have known for years, of the sweet, peaceful church life they have come to expect. They do this by seizing bank accounts, changing locks, openly disturbing the meetings, harassing the saints through phone calls, and more. Through this they hope that the ones they trouble will become worn down, “take the cross,” and surrender the property. They do all this at the encouragement of the ones actively promoting the “tradition of the elders.” Surely this violates the feeling of many. Paul said, “I say this to your shame.... Already then it is altogether a defeat to you that you have lawsuits with one another” (1 Cor. 6:5a, 7a).

Paul could testify, “For am I now trying to win the assent of men or of God? Or am I seeking to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a slave of Christ” (Gal. 1:10). Elders of churches today find it harder to give the same testimony. If in their faithfulness they offend some of the members, there is the great possibility of a lawsuit.

The Apostle Paul was once a zealot for the traditions of the fathers of his Jewish religion. He testified, “For you have heard of my manner of life formerly in Judaism, that I persecuted the church of God excessively and ravaged it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many contemporaries in my race, being more abundantly a zealot for the traditions of my fathers” (Gal. 1:13-14). “Traditions of the fathers” produces religious zealots. Such ones persecute and ravage the church. Do we not see this fruit among us today?

Both the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul warn us of such religious zeal. The Lord said, “Well has Isaiah prophesied concerning you, saying, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart stays far away from Me; But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as teachings the commandments of men’” (Matt. 15:1-9). Paul wrote, “Beware that no one carries you off as spoil through his philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the elements of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col. 2:8). May we all heed this warning.

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