Christ Confronts Religious Tradition

Intro: Some think tradition is one of the greatest evils in the church and in the world; others think it is the most wonderful thing that has ever been devised. The Bible speaks of it in both a positive and a negative way. Jesus is only recorded as using the term once in His ministry (Mat. 15 and its parallel in Mark 7). However, Jesus did use the concept on other occasions.

I. Tradition
   A. Definition
      1. English is: “1a: an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior (as a religious practice or a social custom) b: a belief or story or a body of beliefs or stories relating to the past that are commonly accepted as historical though not verifiable 2: the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction 3: cultural continuity in social attitudes, customs, and institutions 4: characteristic manner, method, or style” (Merriam-Webster).
      2. It is the Greek παράδοσις (paradosis).
         a. Thayer: “1. the act of giving up, the surrender… 2. a giving over which is done by word of mouth or in writing, i.e. tradition by instruction, narrative, precept, etc.” (481).
         b. Vine gives the basic meaning: “a handing down or on (akin to paradidōmi, to hand over, deliver), denotes a tradition” (2:147).
      3. We are speaking of that which has been handed down.
         a. What has been handed down or who handed it down is not intrinsic in the word.
   B. Source of traditions
      1. Either God or man.
      2. Mat. 21:25 “The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him?”
         a. John received authority to baptize from either God or man—there is no other origin.
         b. If another source existed, either Jesus or the chief priest would have stated it.
      3. Zodhiates writes, “A tradition, doctrine or injunction delivered or communicated from one to another, whether divine (1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6) or human (Matt. 15:2, 3, 6; Gal. 1:14; Col. 2:8).”
      4. Vine writes: “(a) the teachings of the Rabbis, interpretations of the Law, which was thereby made void in practice… (b) of apostolic teaching… in 2 Thess. 2:15, of Christian doctrine in general, where the Apostle’s use of the word constitutes a denial that what he preached originated with himself, and a claim for its Divine authority” (2:147-48).
II. Traditions From God

A. 1 Cor. 11:2 “Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.”

1. Here it is translated as ordinances (traditions in the ASV and NKJV).
2. Paul was delivering to the Corinthians the Word of God.
   a. 1 Cor. 2:7-13 “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: 8 Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9 But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. 10 But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. 11 For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. 13 Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.”
   b. 1 Cor. 14:37 “If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.”
3. Thus the ordinances (i.e., traditions) they (and we) were to remember are those that God handed down.

B. 2 The. 2:15; 3:6 “Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle…. 3:6 Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us.”

1. The “tradition which he received of us” in 3:6 refers back to what Paul wrote in 2:15 regarding “the traditions which ye have been taught.”
2. What Paul taught (2:15) is that which the Thessalonians had received (3:6).

C. 2 The. 2:15 “Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.”

1. Context:
   a. Some were disturbed thinking the return of Jesus was imminent.
   b. The man of sin:
      (1) 2 The. 2:3 “Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition;”
      (2) Jesus would not come till a falling away took place.
      (3) This man of sin would deceive: 2 The. 2:10 “And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved.”
   c. 2 The. 2:11-12 “And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: 12 That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”
      (1) In dealing with one’s salvation:
         (a) Some would not believe the truth
         (b) Some would believe a lie.
(2) **Truth:**

(a) Only truth can save; John 8:32 “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

(b) That truth:

(i) Jesus’ Word; John 8:31 “Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;”

(ii) God’s Word; John 17:17 “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.”

2. A change is made from those who will be damned because they do not believe the Truth to those beloved of God.

   a. 2 Thes. 2:13 “But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth:”

      (1) These are brethren who have been chosen.

      (2) The location of their choosing is being in Christ.

   b. Salvation comes through being sanctified:

      (1) By the Spirit (i.e., the message the Spirit reveals in the Gospel)

      (2) Belief of the truth (i.e., God’s Word)

   c. They have been called by the Gospel (God’s Word) to obtain eternal salvation; 2 Thes. 2:14 “Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

3. What must be done after sanctification?

   a. Stand fast and hold the traditions they have been taught—what God has handed down.

   b. It is what God handed down to the apostles through inspiration of the Spirit.

      (1) The apostles spoke those traditions.

      (2) The apostles wrote those traditions down.

4. These are traditions that we must obey if we expect to obtain heaven’s home.

**III. Traditions From Man**

**A. Traditions not authorized by God**

1. Gentile world during Paul’s day.

   a. Rom. 1:19-32

   b. 1 Cor. 6:9-10 “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, 10Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.”

      (1) In becoming Christians they had to stop these sinful traditions.

      (2) 1 Cor. 6:11 “And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.”

2. False doctrines:

   a. Col. 2:8 “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”

      (1) The tradition of men was probably an early form of Gnosticism.
(2) Zodhiates says of the Greek word translated spoil, “Figuratively, of the destructive effects of false teachers who rob believers of the complete riches available in Christ and revealed in the gospel.”

b. All sorts of false doctrines in the world today:
   (1) Various ’isms: Premillennialism, Calvinism, Pentecostalism, etc.
   (2) Denominations: Catholicism, Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Methodism, etc.
   (3) World religions: Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.

c. Specific doctrines regarding: God, salvation, the church, the scheme of redemption, the worship of the church, the organization of the church, the work of the church, and the morals God has given us, etc.

3. Both traditions of the world and from false religions soon make their way into the Lord’s church.

4. We are obligated to:
   a. Contend earnestly for the faith; Jude 3 “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort ye that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”
   b. Ever be on guard:
      (1) Mat. 7:15 “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.”
      (2) Of those bringing in damnable heresies; 2 Pet. 2:1-3 “But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not.”
   c. False traditions will bring us into the bondage of sin causing eternal separation from God.

B. Traditions authorized by God but not required:

1. Mat. 15:1-9 “Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying, 7Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread. 8But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition? For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death. 9But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; 10And honour not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition. 11Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. 12But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.”

   a. The tradition of the elders mentioned is the washing of hands prior to eating.
      (1) This tradition regarded “the ceremonial washing they felt mandatory before every meal” (Chouinard).
      (2) This tradition is a good, profitable, healthy, and sanitary action that we should follow today.
b. It is expedient to wash our hands prior to eating.

2. Many traditions are handed down both religious and secular.
   a. Some are good and profitable.
   b. Some should be discarded.
   c. Each generation must determine if those optional human traditions are advantageous or not.
      (1) Society, technology, etc., change so some traditions should be discarded and new ones started.
      (2) Some from 100 years ago would not work well in our time when they worked well then.
      (3) Some have worked well through the years and should not be discarded, as they are always profitable.
   d. Traditions from one society or nation will not work in another.
   e. We must be willing to set them aside or continue them depending on various aspects.

3. Consider traditions that are optional in nature but condemned:

C. Elevating man-made traditions to the status of God’s Word.
   1. The Pharisees had made the man-made optional tradition of washing hands prior to eating a mandatory matter.
      a. They were saying the disciples were committing sin by violating this tradition.
      b. Jesus sharply rebukes them.
   2. Consider how these traditions were viewed:
      a. Kenneth Boles: “These traditions were the teachings of the rabbis, faithfully memorized and passed on by each generation until A.D. 200, when they began to be written down in what is called the Mishnah. These teachings had little to do with Scripture exegesis, but dealt rather with the minute interpretations of things clean and unclean, actions permitted and forbidden. When one peruses the conflicting opinions in some 800 pages of the modern Oxford translation of the Mishnah, it is not hard to see why Paul associated this learning with the ‘fathers’ and not with God.”
      b. A. R. Gordon: “Although originally mere expansions or embellishments of Scripture, the Halakhic traditions in particular acquired an authority and influence equal to those of the Law itself. This principle was explicitly taught in the schools of both Hillel and Shammai, and was accepted by the Pharisees generally…. Among the more rigid Pharisees, indeed, the oral Law was held to possess an even greater sanctity than the written; for the oral was the ‘perfection’ of the written, and he who knew and followed it was wiser and holier than he who observed merely the written” (2:610).
      c. They elevated the oral traditions above God’s Word.
   3. We have seen this take place in the church.
      a. Regarding the Lord’s Supper:
         (1) Time of the Supper being before or after the sermon
(2) Placing a cloth over the elements to keep flies off to some thinking it was sinful to remove it
(3) The use of a single container for the juice
b. An invitation song

4. Elevating an optional matter to a mandatory matter is sinful as the scribes and Pharisees did regarding washing hands prior to eating.

D. Allowing them to fail to do what God has commanded.

1. Another of their traditions; Mark 7:11 “But ye say, If a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; he shall be free.”

2. God’s command:
   a. Exo. 20:12 “Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.”
   b. Exo. 21:17 “And he that curseth his father, or his mother, shall surely be put to death.”

3. What was happening:
   a. When parents had need, the children would say “Corban.”
      (1) Louw and Nida mention that Corban is borrowed from Hebrew then define it as “that which has been set aside as a gift to be given later to God, but which is still at the disposal of the owner—gift to God, offering, corban” (1:533).
      (2) Chouinard writes, “these resources could not be used by anyone else, although they could be used for one’s personal benefit while still living.”
   b. Jews said the binding force of the vow made it impossible to use it for one’s parents, regardless of their situation.
   c. The “gift” superseded anything else.

4. Positive traditions from this:
   a. Giving: a gift that will be dedicated to sacred use.
      (1) We need more to give financially to the Lord.
         a) 1 Cor. 16:1-2 “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.”
         b) The giving on the first day of the week should not be the extent of our giving.
      (2) God had mandatory offerings for the Israelites, but there were also freewill offerings they made.
         a) These were totally voluntary.
         b) Too often today we must cajole brethren into giving as God intends.
      (3) We need more like the Macedonians; 2 Cor. 8:2-5 “How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality. For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves; praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God.”
b. The binding nature of vows.

(1) Old Testament shows the responsibility to pay vows.

   (a) Deut. 23:21 “When thou shalt vow a vow unto the LORD thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it: for the LORD thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee.”

   (b) Ecc. 5:4 “When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed.”

(2) By Jesus’ time they no longer were respecting the binding nature of vows.

   (a) They only respected them if said in the proper manner.

   (b) The form of the vow was more important than the vow itself.

   (c) The form determined if they had to fulfill it.

   (d) Mat. 23:16-22 “Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor! 17 Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? 18 And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing: but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty. 19 Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? 20 Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon. 21 And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein. 22 And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon.”

(3) God expects us to keep what we say:

   (a) Jesus’ teachings:

      (i) Mat. 5:37 “But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.”

      (ii) Mat. 12:37 “For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.”

   (b) Jam. 5:12 “But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation.”

5. They were not keeping their word with this tradition.

   a. They would proclaim their goods as being Corban—a gift to God.

   b. They would continue to use the gifts for personal usage.

(1) Blomberg mentions, “The Corban practice in view was that of pledging money or other material resources to the temple to be paid upon one’s death. These funds could therefore not be transferred to anyone else but could still be used for one’s own benefit while one was still alive (v. 5)” (238).

(2) When their parents needed support, they would say their goods are Corban and refuse to help their parents.

(3) Yet, they continued to use their goods.

(4) They could use all their goods for their own personal use and never have to give it to God.

6. They transgressed God’s commandment by their tradition.

   a. Jesus quotes the Law of Moses:

      (1) Mat. 15:4 “For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death.”
(2) Exo. 20:12 “Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.”

b. He applies the honoring of one’s parents to include taking care of their needs.
   (1) It is not simply being obedient to them.
   (2) 1 Tim. 5:8 “But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.”

c. They Jews allow the children to violate God’s commandments by saying Corban.

7. When we use human tradition to allow us to violate God’s commands, we sin.
   a. Even those traditions that are optional and advantageous.
   b. No one has this right; Mat. 15:6 “And honour not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition.”
   c. Three things come from making God’s commandment of none effect by traditions:
      (1) Transgresses God’s commands; Mat. 15:3 “But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?”
      (2) Becomes a hypocrite; Mat. 15:8 “This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me.”
      (3) Makes his worship vain (worthless); Mat. 15:9 “But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.”

Conclusion: Tradition is “that which has been handed down.” It is applied to things handed down by God—His commands or laws. These are things that are mandatory for man. It is also applied to things handed down by man. Some of those are sinful in nature. Some are optional. We must determine if those optional ones are expedient and be willing to discard those that are no longer effective. We must never elevate man-made traditions to the status of God’s Word or allow them to avoid doing what God commands.

WORKS CITED