

### Introduction:

My all-time favorite musical is *The Fiddler on the Roof*. It begins with a rousing song entitled “Tradition.” During this song, the main character, Tevya, discussed his society’s need for traditions. He explained the town was like a fiddler on the roof who was in danger of falling. The town and its inhabitants stayed on the roof by the stability of their traditions. Local congregations are like this town and the fiddler, in danger of falling. However, we too have our traditions that keep us “on the roof.” That is to say, our traditions help us remain a pillar and buttress of the truth (cf. **I Timothy 3:15**).

This sounds strange to us because of the connotation we have placed on “tradition.” We have heard so much teaching about the traditions of men versus the commands of God we often equate tradition with error. However, the word “tradition” doesn’t actually mean that. The word translated “tradition” means “giving up, giving over”<sup>1</sup> or “handing down or over.”<sup>2</sup> In the New Testament, the word was used to describe doctrines or practices passed on from one to another, especially from one generation to another. Thus in **Matthew 15:2**, the Pharisees spoke of practices handed down from the Jewish elders over the generations. However, in **II Thessalonians 2:15**, Paul spoke of traditions handed down from the apostles to the churches. Understanding the use of the word “tradition” more accurately helps us recognize we should not dismiss everything to which we can possibly apply the word tradition. Rather, we recognize three different kinds of traditions and what we should do with them.

### Discussion:

#### I. Traditions we may not keep.

- A. We may not keep traditions for which there is no authority from Christ. **II Timothy 3:16-17** says the scripture equips us for every good work. If we find no scriptural authority for a tradition, it is not a good work. **Colossians 2:8** tells us about human traditions. These originate with man according to worldly and fleshly principles and not with Christ. A tradition may seem good to us in human and fleshly wisdom, but if it did not originate from Christ, it is vain.
- B. We may not keep traditions which transgress or disregard God’s law. For example, notice **Matthew 15:1-9**. Was there anything unlawful about the elders’ tradition of washing hands? Not particularly, but when they forced that tradition as law, they were disregarding God’s law, setting their tradition above it. Further, Jesus demonstrated how the Pharisees had placed manmade traditions above God’s law by talking about the tradition of Korban. Korban meant dedicated to God. The Pharisees had worked out a system whereby they could dedicate their property to God and felt relieved of God’s law to honor their parents. Were they allowed to dedicate their property to God? Surely. But not in order to get out of obeying God’s commands.
- C. We must not allow traditions that have no authority from Christ. Further, we must not allow any traditions to be followed in a way that disregards or transgresses God’s law. If we do, we may have traditions, but we have already fallen off the roof.

#### II. Traditions we must keep.

- A. In **I Corinthians 11:2**, Paul commended the brethren because they kept traditions. That shocks us until we understand the problem is not that something is traditional but from where the tradition came. These brethren were keeping what had been handed down to them by the apostles, who in turn received it from the Holy Spirit. Thus, though they were traditions and should become traditional, they were authorized and more than authorized, commanded.
- B. Further, **II Thessalonians 2:15** commands us to keep the traditions handed down by the apostles and **3:6** teaches us to withdraw from anyone who would not keep these traditions. Why? Because that which the apostles were handing down were not manmade traditions but backed by the authority of Jesus Christ (**Galatians 1:11-12; I Corinthians 14:37**).
- C. As **II Timothy 2:2** demonstrates, not only must we keep these traditions, we must pass them on to faithful brethren who will continue to hand them along.

<sup>1</sup> Strong’s Enhanced Lexicon, #3862

<sup>2</sup> Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1957, 621.

- D. For example, we must keep the traditions of the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week (**Acts 20:7**). We must keep the traditions of worshipping God and edifying one another through singing (**Ephesians 5:19**). We must keep the tradition of providing for the church and its members through a weekly collection (**I Corinthians 16:1-2**). We must keep the tradition of baptizing folks in water for the remission of their sins (**Acts 2:38**).
- E. We cannot dispense with these traditions. If we do, we will fall off the roof.

### III. Traditions we may keep but don't have to.

- A. As we consider the traditions commanded by God, we recognize God did not always specify how to fulfill each command. As such, congregations often develop traditions in the manner in which they keep these commands.
  1. For instance, consider our traditions of assembling. We know congregations are supposed to come together (**I Corinthians 5:4; 14:23, 26**). Further, we know we must not forsake the assembling of ourselves together (**Hebrews 10:25**). That is a tradition of God that we must keep. However, apart from knowing we must at least come together on Sunday for the Lord's Supper, God never explained when or how often the congregation should assemble. From **I Corinthians 16:1-2**, it seems apparent the Corinthians gathered weekly on Sunday. However, in **Acts 2:46**, the Jerusalem church was assembling every day. When do we assemble? We have established our own tradition. We assemble twice on Sunday. Once or twice a year we have assemblies throughout the week that we call our Gospel Meeting.
  2. However, what if another congregation decided to have an assembly only on Sunday evening and then another assembly on Tuesday and Thursday? That would be their tradition. Neither their tradition nor ours would be wrong. They are both authorized by God's command to assemble. Neither violate or disregard God's law. Nor could either congregation claim they are bound to keep these traditions. For instance, we are certainly allowed to change our assembly schedule. We could stop having our Sunday morning assembly. We could start having assemblies on Friday nights.
  3. Having recognized these traditions, we need to understand something about the nature of the local congregation (a group of people in a local area who agree to jointly endeavor under a common oversight, using a common treasury to serve and worship God). We may not be bound by God's law to keep any particular congregation's scriptural traditions. However, we are bound by our joint agreement to be part of this congregation to keep its traditional practices. Practically, that means it is true there is nothing in scripture that says I have to attend two assemblies on Sunday. However, if I am part of a congregation who is keeping God's tradition of the assembly by having two on Sunday, then I am supposed to be there, otherwise I am forsaking the assembling of ourselves together. Further, I am not allowed to say, "Instead of going to the assembly tonight, I am just going to have a home Bible study with a group of Christians." Can the congregation change its tradition? Certainly. Can I be part of a congregation with a different tradition? Sure. Can I decide I don't like the tradition of the congregation of which I am a member and do my own thing? No.
- B. Consider some other traditions we may keep but don't have to. The number of songs and prayers in our assemblies, which book we sing from, times and opportunities of classes, Gospel meetings, Fall Focus, number of evangelists. I don't want to shock anyone but how many of us realize the use of the phrase "church of Christ" to identify this local congregation is really one of the authorized traditions that we may keep but don't have to?
- C. The consent of the members in the congregation to follow these traditional practices with a cooperative spirit stabilizes the congregation, keeping it from falling "off the roof."

### Conclusion:

We must be careful how we view traditions. Traditions and traditionalism are not necessarily wrong. Rather, we must be clear that traditions of men according to the world and not according to Christ are sinful. However, we must keep and pass on the traditions of God. Further, the authorized traditions we use to keep the traditions of God are good and should be kept peacefully. Let us keep the traditions of God so we too might be commended (cf. **I Corinthians 11:2**).