

SHALL WE WORSHIP IN TRUTH OR BY TRADITION?

By Dub McClish

Introduction

“But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23–24).¹ These words from our Lord to the woman at Jacob’s well set before us the significance of the entire subject of worship and particularly of the subject of this chapter. The Lord made it plain that God desires two things concerning worship: (1) true worshipers and (2) true worship.

The study of this subject necessarily involves the definition of the following terms: (1) worship, (2) Truth, and (3) tradition. This subject also raises some questions for our consideration: (1) Are Truth and tradition contradictory? (2) Is worship by tradition wrong? (3) Is the Lord’s church “hopelessly bound by tradition”?

Definitions

The Meaning of Worship

The meaning of *worship* has become perverted in the minds of many in recent years by false teaching and misinformation. It has become popular to define it as merely an attitude or emotion rather than any specific act or acts. It is immediately apparent that if this is true men are free to do almost anything they choose in the name of “worship” to God and it He will accept it, as long as they claim an attitude of sincere reverence and devotion. Whether or not those who have sought justification for their use of mechanical musical instruments in worship originated this view may be impossible to determine, but they have certainly made this use of it. In the debate between Alan E. Highers and Given O. Blakely (April 12–15, 1988, Neosho, MO), Blakely (representing the Independent Christian Church) denied that worship consisted of certain acts

or elements and that Scripture must regulate our worship. Rather, he amazingly affirmed that the sincere person in Christ could not worship wrongly.² Obviously, by this view using instruments in worship (or any other practice called “worship” and done sincerely) would be acceptable to God.

Another fallacy that is based upon the misconception that worship is merely an attitude or emotion is that everything the Christian does is worship, from washing dishes to putting gas in the car. Those who would turn the worship assembly into a “party” or a performance by professional musicians or entertainers would justify these corruptions by the same erroneous concept of worship.

The very definitions of the words (both Hebrew and Greek) translated “worship” refute the foolish idea that worship is a mere attitude or emotion. The standard lexicons tell us that these words connote such things as bowing down before, venerating, revering, serving, esteeming, doing obeisance to, kissing toward a higher person. In a footnote on Matthew 2:2 and similar verses, the American Standard Version (1901) translators recognized that worship involves action. On the word *worship* in the text, the footnote comments: “The Greek word denotes an **act of reverence** whether paid to a creature...or to the Creator...” (emph. DM).

Furthermore, descriptions of worship in Scripture clearly show that certain acts constitute worship while others do not. Dozens of times in the Old Testament we read that someone bowed his head, bowed himself to the earth, or fell on his face “and worshiped the Lord” (e.g., Gen. 24:26, 52; Ex. 4:31; Josh. 5:14; Psa. 95:6; et al.). The same idea is continued in the New Testament as men fell down before the Lord, held Him by the feet, or bowed their knees in worship to Him (Mat. 2:11; 18:26; 28:9; Mark 15:19; et al.).

When Abraham took Isaac to the mountain to offer him as a sacrifice, he said to his servants at the foot of the mountain, “I and the lad will go yonder and worship” (Gen. 22:5). Abraham understood two things about the meaning of worship that many moderns have missed: (1) Worship was more than an emotion or an attitude; indeed, he had a reverent attitude before

he left home or he would not have taken the painful journey God commanded. (2) Not everything he did constituted worship. Preparing for the journey and making the journey to the place of sacrifice did not constitute worship, but what he would do in the mountain (offer a sacrifice) did.

By no means should anyone conclude that attitude and emotion are excluded from true worship. Contrariwise, the “true worshiper” which the Father seeks is the sincere, genuine worshiper—one whose heart is in his devotional acts. This is the meaning of worshipping God “in spirit” in the passage with which we began. Not only is the person’s body to be doing the acts ordained by Christ for acceptable worship of Deity, but one’s spirit must be involved. However, merely claiming to have a spirit of reverence does not constitute true worship. In fact, one belies the claim of a reverent spirit if he ignores or rejects the acts of worship ordained by God. True worship may therefore be defined as sincere devotion to God that expresses reverence and godly fear by means of spiritual acts ordained by God.

The Meaning of Truth

A consideration of the meaning of *truth* in Jesus’ statement is now appropriate. What did Jesus mean when he said that men must worship God “in truth” (John 4:23–24)? The Greek word translated “truth” in this and many other passages is *aletheia*. When used objectively, as it is here, Thayer says it means “the truth, as taught in the Christian religion, respecting God and the execution of his purposes through Christ, and respecting the duties of man....”³ This common use of “the truth” in the New Testament is simply another way of referring to the revealed will of God through Christ. Jesus brought the Truth, which He heard from God (John 8:40). He identified the Word of His Father as “the Truth” (John 17:17). Thus we read of “the word of truth” (2 Cor. 6:7; 2 Tim. 2:15; Jam. 1:18), which is identified as “the gospel of your salvation” (Eph. 1:13; cf. Col. 1:5). The lost are those who “obey not the gospel” in 2 Thessalonians 1:8, but in Romans 2:8 they are those who “do not obey the truth,” thus making

the Truth the same as the Gospel. *Truth* in John 4:23–24 is simply another word for *Gospel* or the *Word of God*.

What did Jesus mean when He said we must worship God “in truth”? The most obvious meaning is “according to the Truth.” In other words, our worship must conform to the teaching of Christ concerning how God desires to be worshiped. This means that in worship (as in all other things we say and do) we must do only that which is authorized by Christ (Col. 3:17). When we have learned what the New Testament apostles and prophets taught the saints to do in worship, and when we see what acts of worship were done by the first century church with apostolic approval, we shall know what constitutes worship according to Truth for all remaining time. No man has the right to suggest that God can be pleased with the offering of any additional or any fewer acts of worship than those specified in the New Testament following the day of Pentecost. Men dare not make substitution for or alteration of the God–ordained acts of worship. He seeks true worshipers who will worship Him according to His own revealed Truth. Kittel states it very well in his comments on John 4:23–24: “This is an indication that such worship can take place only as determined by the revelation accomplished in Jesus (v. 25f.), and consequently as determined by the Revealer who is the only way of access to God (1:18; 14:6).”⁴

The Meaning of Tradition

“Tradition” is the translation of *paradosis*, meaning to hand down, or hand over. It refers to those things that have come to us from those who have gone before us. *Tradition* is a neutral word, connoting neither good nor evil innately. At least three categories of tradition exist, all of which deserve our attention: First, there are the inspired “traditions,” which represent the Word that was revealed to the apostles and which they “handed down” to those who came after them, including us. Paul referred to “traditions” in this way to the Corinthians: “Now I praise you that ye remember me in all things, and hold fast the traditions, even as I delivered them to you” (1 Cor. 11:2).⁵ Paul referred to traditions in the same way twice more: “Therefore, brethren, stand fast,

and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle” (2 The. 2:15); “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” (3:6). Obviously, Paul was making reference to the inspired Word of God, which he had taught them in person and by letter. These traditions were most certainly to be observed, and those who refused to do so were no longer to remain in fellowship.

Second is a class of “traditions” the inspired speakers/writers always mentioned with warning and/or condemnation. These are religious traditions that proceed from men and that are in conflict with the Word of God. Thus Jesus soundly condemned “the traditions of the elders”:⁶ “But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?... Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition” (Mat. 15:3, 6; cf. Mark 7:3–8, 13). Paul wrote of the time when he once followed those very traditions of his fathers with exceeding zeal (Gal. 1:14). He warned that we should take care not to let ourselves be spoiled through philosophy and vain deceits, “after the tradition of men, ... and not after Christ” (Col. 2:8). Clearly, human traditions that contradict the Word of God must be avoided. They will cause one to reject God’s Word in their favor and will ultimately cause the soul to be lost.

Third, there are those human traditions that do not conflict with God’s Word, but that fall into the realm of expediency or option in carrying out God’s commands concerning worship. We may refer to these as “innocent traditions.” God ordains that we assemble each Lord’s day to worship Him and He tells us what acts are pleasing to Him (prayer, singing, partaking of the Lord’s supper, giving as we have been prospered, and studying His Word), but he has not told us how many prayers to pray or how many songs to sing. Further, He has not told us in what order or arrangement to place these things, nor what time of day to meet. Human “traditions” of this kind are innocent and harmless as long as we remember that they are human rather than Divine. They become wrong only when they are bound as if they were Divine law.

It should be apparent that when anyone refers to “tradition” in religion he must be careful to understand that the word is used in various ways. One’s attitude toward “tradition” will depend upon which kind of “tradition” is under consideration.

Are Truth and Tradition Contradictory?

The title of this essay implies that Truth and tradition are contradictory and that if one worships “in Truth” he cannot worship “by tradition” and vice versa. However, as seen from the definition of various kinds of traditions given above, the answer may be “yes” or “no.” If the tradition by which one worships is that which was given to us by the inspired men, then it is itself the Truth. We not only may or shall, but we **must** worship God by tradition in this sense, for it is Divine law.

However, not even all human tradition contradicts Divine Truth. As already noticed, some human traditions in worship merely involve the innocent and expedient arrangements for implementing the commands of God and are therefore not in conflict with Truth. However, those human traditions that cause one to go beyond or fall short of God’s Word and/or those that are elevated to the level of Scripture are most certainly contradictory to Truth and must be scrupulously avoided.

Is Worship by Tradition Wrong?

The correct answer to this question hinges on the kind of tradition one has in mind. If the tradition being considered is merely the long-established, handed-down arrangement for doing what God has commanded us to do, which neither violates nor alters God’s Word, then we do no wrong in observing such tradition. That the arrangements are human in origin and have been handed down to us from previous generations (and to that extent are “human traditions”) does not make them sinful.

These arrangements differ from place to place. In some places the church observes the Lord’s supper before the sermon, but in other places afterward. One congregation may have a

Scripture reading before the first song, while another may not. Some congregations meet at 10:00 a.m. for worship while others meet at 11:00 a.m. All of these various arrangements (and many others) are likely the result of “tradition”—that which was done by those who came before them, passing it down to the present generation, perhaps through several generations.

However, those human traditions in religion that change the acts God has specified for us when we worship, and thus contradict the Truth, are most certainly wrong. The use of instruments in worship is not merely a traditional “arrangement” to carry out the command to sing. Use of mechanical instruments constitutes an **addition** to the worship of God which runs beyond what God has authorized. The observance of “Ash Wednesday,” “Good Friday,” “Easter,” “Lent,” and similar religious festivals and “holy days” which are unheard of and unauthorized in Holy Writ are in conflict with the simple observance of the Lord’s day every week. The denominational versions of the Lord’s supper that call for its observance on days other than the first day of the week and on the first day of the week once a month or once a quarter are rooted in unscriptural human traditions. The Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and the observance of their corruption of the “Lord’s supper in connection with weddings and funerals further illustrate tradition that is sinful. These and many similar practices are in conflict with the Truth and illustrate the kind of tradition that renders worship a vain exercise in religiosity.

Tradition may also be made to contradict Truth when an otherwise innocent human tradition is elevated to the level of Divine obligation. This is what occurred many years ago when some brethren decided that the human tradition of using only one cup for the fruit of the vine was, after all, the **only** authorized practice. They insisted on keeping this tradition to the point of dividing many churches over it. One would be just as wrong to take the human tradition of beginning the Sunday morning worship with two songs, a prayer, and a third song and insist that this was the only arrangement that was pleasing to God. Both the denominational practices mentioned earlier and such practices among our brethren as those just mentioned are

condemned in the words of the Lord to the scribes and Pharisees: “Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition” (Mark 7:9).

We may summarize this section by saying that the traditions that cause us to be wrong in our worship are those that either change the Word of God or that elevate human tradition to the level of Divine Truth.

Is the Lord’s Church “Hopelessly Bound by Tradition”?

Certain critics within the church who are intent on overhauling it in every respect have long made the charge that the church is “hopelessly bound by tradition.” The question implies that tradition is a terrible, odious, restrictive thing and the church is enslaved by it. If brethren were generally bound by human “tradition” in the sense of the doctrines and practices that violate and supplant God’s Word, then I would add my voice of concern to theirs. But are they charging that we are bound by denominational tradition? What do they mean by *tradition* in this charge? There are at least two means of discerning the answer to this question: (1) observing the source of the charge and (2) observing the things to which these critics are opposed.

Just who are those making this charge? The charge comes from those liberal sophisticates who have abandoned (if they ever possessed it) the ideal of New Testament Christianity. There have always been some of these around, but they started gaining respectability in the 1960s through the pages of *Mission Magazine*. Their ilk are now in the pulpits of some of “our” largest congregations and behind the lecterns in practically all of “our” colleges and universities. The fact that the charge of “tradition” comes from those who have made or who are making a reputation for themselves by their heterodoxy ought to raise a red flag in the mind of every lover of the Truth. It does not take much reading of or listening to these brethren to see what constitutes the “traditions” which they so much despise and from which they would so eagerly “free” the Lord’s people.

Now, what are the terrible “traditions” against which these folk (both men and women) are railing? One thing they have in mind is anything that has been done the same way for a “long time” (which to them may be two consecutive Sundays). They cannot stand that which is consistent, planned, and regular. They want to constantly change things about the church, particularly the worship. They believe there is virtue in change, in “shaking things up,” just for the sake of change.

Perhaps I can best illustrate this by relating some experiences I have had with some of them. In 1971 I had a troubled and brief (seven months) stint with a 1,200-member church in which the elders appointed a “worship committee” to plan the order of worship each week. They placed some men on the committee (including one elder) who thought that everything about the worship needed to be shaken up—every week. If we started with a song one week, we had to start with something different the next week. They tried splitting the sermon time on Sunday morning among two other fellows and me, just to be different. They tried singing during the collection and singing during the Lord’s supper. They tried “responsive readings.” They wanted to do away with the invitation altogether.

One committee member (with hearty praise from the liberal elder on the committee) wanted to have the Lord’s supper during Bible classes so we could all sit in a circle and face each other (“How can you commune with the back of someone’s head?” he reasoned.) It was like a circus every Sunday and required a detailed printed program to have any idea of what was coming next. While my strong objections to such foolishness did not prevent all of it, the elders finally got enough flak from various members (and me) that they returned to some degree of sanity and order (only out of policy, rather than principle, unfortunately). It was a terribly upsetting experience for those who loved God and His Word, and it was all but impossible to worship because of the uncertainty of what was going to be done from one Sunday to the next. The folks who pushed for these childish changes were convinced that the church was “hopelessly bound by tradition.”

It was predictable that this outcry against “tradition” in worship was really only a beginning point. Those fellows were “testing the waters” concerning the worship assemblies. That congregation has continued to hire liberal preachers and attract liberal members and move increasingly leftward. From reading its bulletin in subsequent years, the congregation is hardly distinguishable from any run-of-the-mill denominational church in its terminology and practices. Those brethren made the fatal mistake of confusing worship done in a decent and orderly fashion (1 Cor. 14:40) on a continued basis with being “hopelessly bound by tradition.” I suppose they never considered the fact that by their own “reasoning,” changing the order of worship every week was in fact creating a new type of the very “tradition” they were opposing—a “tradition” of changing things every week.

As mentioned in the case above, the identification of a simple, consistent, and orderly program of worship each Lord’s day with enslavement to “tradition” was really just the first level of attack. When such folk see that there is not enough strength in the eldership to stop them and there is even encouragement of their aims within the eldership, their moves become ever bolder. If the preacher in the congregation objects to their work they will see that he moves on “for the good of the church” and is replaced with someone who will support them or at least not oppose them. What happened in that one church has occurred in the same or similar form in hundreds of others in the past few decades. After 20 years (sometimes less) it may finally dawn on some of the older saints in such churches that the congregation of which they are members is now encouraging and doing the very things it was adamantly opposing only a few years before. Alas, by that time it is too late to change its direction.

One can now hear many of these liberals including far more fundamental things in their definition of the “traditions” that allegedly have a stranglehold on the church. Many of them are strongly inveighing against any pattern concept for the church, nor can they be content for others to hold to such an outmoded “tradition.” Such things as insisting on Divine authority for what we practice and preach, on the Scriptural organization of the church, on the Scriptural

steps in the plan of salvation,⁷ and on the five Scriptural acts of congregational worship are among the “traditions” that are so odious to them. Refusing to allow women in the pulpit and in the eldership and deaconship and insisting upon congregational singing without mechanical instruments in worship are further “traditions” from which some of these extremists would free the church.

They would now openly foist upon us a “new hermeneutic” (which is really no more than the “old hermeneutic” of liberal theology).⁸ They would have us throw out the plain meaning of the words of the Bible and the necessity of reasoning correctly to understand those words. Instead, they would have us “read between the lines” for the “spiritual” meaning of Holy Writ. They have “progressed” far beyond seeking any direct statements, obligatory examples, or implications in Scripture by which to determine God–ordained doctrine and practice. They have only contempt for the Biblical concept of the prohibitive force of the silence of Scripture. Book, chapter, and verse preaching is a subject of ridicule to these fellows.

They have “outgrown” all of these “shackles” and some of them are compassing sea and land with evangelistic zeal to make as many double–damned proselytes as possible (Mat. 23: 15). To them the church is merely a denomination and a pretty sorry one at that. They feel called of God to make it a better denomination and are working almost feverishly to bring about changes that will in fact reduce the church to sectarian status. A few years ago, those who became disenchanted with the Lord’s way would go on into a denominational body of their own free will or be forced to. However, the younger generation of gainsayers has put us on notice that they are not about to get out, but that they will stay and work like termites from within to eat away the faith of as many as possible and to make the church over according to their own liberal agenda. Tragically, there are many preaching and teaching positions where they are handsomely remunerated while they dispense their theological poison and the number of these positions seems to be increasing.

It is a great irony that those who are crying, “the church is hopelessly bound by tradition” are the very ones who will enslave the church to destructive tradition where they have their way. They are the ones who are crying for the introduction of instrumental music, choirs, women preachers and elders, and such like. They are the ones who want “high church” ritual in our worship assemblies. They are the ones who say that we can learn much about worship from the Lutherans, the Pentecostals, or even the Roman Catholics.⁹ These old denominations and their practices are the very epitome of the kind of human traditions that render worship vain. Verily, it is when these praters against the Truth have their way that the church becomes “hopelessly bound by tradition.”

Conclusion

It is evident that the “tradition” that liberalism finds intolerable is comprised of the very things the Lord commands and/or permits us to do in complying with His Divine will. The practice of worshiping in a long-standing, set format which others before us have followed (assuming it conforms to the Scriptural pattern for worship, of course) does not mean that we are “hopelessly bound by tradition.” Neither the Lord nor Paul hardly had such an innocent arrangement in mind when they so strongly condemned the traditions of men (Mark 7:13; Col. 2:8). The church apparently followed some consistent order of worship from its beginning, for so the words, *they continued steadfastly* imply (Acts 2:42).

The charge that the church is “hopelessly bound by tradition” is no more than a deceptive excuse to do away with well-founded and expedient arrangements for carrying out the Lord’s instructions and the instructions themselves, and in their place inserting all sorts of innovations and inventions based on anti-scriptural tradition and philosophy. Let us never shrink from carrying out the inspired traditions that are set forth in the New Testament in all things, including our worship of God and His Son.

Endnotes

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

² Alan E. Highers and Given O. Blakely, *The Highers–Blakely Debate on Instrumental Music In Worship* (Denton, TX: Valid Pub., Inc., 1988), pp. 38, 45–46, 61–64, et al.

³ Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York, NY: American Book Co., n.d.), p. 26.

⁴ Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1964), 1:246–47.

⁵ Curiously, the KJV rendered *paradosis* “ordinances” in this passage. The ASV rendering, “traditions,” is consistent with the other occurrences of *paradosis* in the New Testament.

⁶ The reader is cautioned against confusing the “elders” among the apostate Jews during the earthly life of Jesus (cf. Mat. 15:2) with his provision for “elders” in every congregation of His church (Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; et al.).

⁷ I recently listened to a taped sermon of one of these firebrands who credited Walter Scott, the nineteenth century pioneer preacher, with the five-step plan of salvation. He further told us how Scott came up with it—he happened to have four fingers and a thumb on his hand. This erudite historian went on to inform his audience that if Scott had possessed six or four digits on his hand he would have had **that** many steps in his plan and we would now be either “six-steppers” or “four-steppers.”

⁸ Thomas Olbricht (Pepperdine University) and Leonard Allen (Abilene Christian University) forthrightly advocated the abandonment of the rational hermeneutic (which has brought about the restoration of primitive Christianity) in the annual Preachers’ and Church Leaders’ Forum at Freed–Hardeman College, October 14, 1989. At the same time they unabashedly defended the adoption of an irrational “new hermeneutic” that denies the importance of doctrine and exalts “piety.” My question is, “Can a person be pious who ignores the doctrine of Christ?”

⁹ Wesley Reagan is a case in point. He was a “liberal when liberal wasn’t cool,” in the mid–1960s. While preaching for the liberal Burke Rd. congregation in Pasadena, TX, he attended a denominational conference on worship and wrote in his bulletin that we could learn a lot from the denominations. One of his associates at Burke Rd. for a year or two was Jim Bevis, one of the original directors of the old “Campus Evangelism” movement, the forerunner of the Crossroads/Boston/International Church of Christ Movement. Reagan took his own advice so well that he abandoned the church altogether and became an ordained Methodist preacher. Apparently, Bevis also took Reagan’s advice. He became a Pentecostal preacher and in 1989 was anointed an “apostle” by Don Finto, the Nashville, TN, self-appointed “apostle.”

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