

## About Tradition

Barry O'Dell

The word **tradition** can evoke a couple of different reactions. Some view that tradition always refers to a man-made doctrine or practice. Others, having the proper Biblical understanding of the term, know that there is both a positive and negative use of the word. Of the thirteen times the word is found in the King James only two references are positive (Matt. 15:2-3, 6; Mk. 7:3, 5, 8-9, 13; Gal. 1:14; Col. 2:8; 2 Thes. 2:15; 3:6; 1 Pet. 1:18). The word is found fourteen times in the New King James (1 Cor. 11:2 - the KJV uses *ordinances*). The definition of that term (παράδοσις) is “to deliver in teaching; a tradition, doctrine, or injunction delivered or communicated from one to another.”<sup>1</sup> The three times (based on the NKJ) the word is used in a positive since are all in the writings of Paul. To the Corinthians he wrote, “*Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you*” (1 Cor. 11:2). Similar words are found in Second Thessalonians 2:15, “*Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.*” Finally, “*But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us*” (2 Thes. 3:6).

The remaining eleven uses of **tradition** illustrate the negative, sinful side of this topic. The Pharisees (Matt. 15; Mk. 7) were guilty of this very thing. They saw Jesus’ disciples eating without washing their hands (Mk. 7:1-2). They asked, “*Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands*” (Mk. 7:5)? The Pharisees asked this because they held to many types of washings that had been handed down over time (Mk. 7:3-4). While it may be hygienic to wash your hands before you eat, it is certainly not a part of God’s revealed will for mankind. The problem with the Pharisees was that they were willing to circumvent the revealed will of God for man-made traditions (Mk. 7:6-13).

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Paul used **tradition** in Galatians 1:14 as he discussed his pre-conversion state as a leader in Judaism. While Judaism did originate with God and was holy, just, and good (Rom. 7:12), Christ was the end or goal of the Law (Rom. 10:4). After Pentecost, the New Covenant of Christ is the Law to which all men are amenable (Acts 17:30-31; 1 Cor. 9:21). Colossians 2:8 is a warning against the “**tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.**” The final use of **tradition** in the New Testament is First Peter 1:18: “*Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver and gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers.*” It is abundantly clear that there are traditions which are sinful.

What about apostolic tradition (1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thes. 2:15; 3:6)? How is it that the twelve could establish traditions and then encourage others to follow them? Simply, the apostles received their authority from Jesus and were filled with the Holy Spirit. John 14-16 is an extensive conversation between Jesus and His apostles about what would happen once He returned to the Father. The Father would send the Holy Spirit and He would teach them all things and cause them to remember all that Jesus had taught them (Jn. 14:26). The Spirit would guide the apostles into all truth and would glorify Christ (Jn. 16:13-15). John’s record of the Great Commission reads, “*So Jesus said to them again, Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you. And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*” (Jn. 20:21-23). Luke recorded that they were instructed to wait in Jerusalem “*until you are endued with power from on high*” (Lk. 24:49). These promises culminated as recorded in Acts 2 when power from the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the twelve (Acts 2:1-4). Throughout the book of Acts we find those obedient men speaking by the Holy Spirit as was promised (Acts 5:32). Luke informs us that the church “*continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine*” (Acts 2:42). Paul wrote that the church was founded upon the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). Of what he wrote and spoke Paul said, “*If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord*” (1 Cor. 14:37). There is a major difference between man-made traditions and the

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**W**hen you hear the word “orthodoxy” what comes to mind? Some may cringe, associating it with a rigid system of inflexible rules. Others might perceive any advocacy for Biblical orthodoxy as promoting human legalism or moral perfectionism. However, Biblical orthodoxy is far from these notions. It is actually quite refreshing. God loves His creation and communicates His expectations in a way that adherents can live a full and flourishing life of abundance (John 10:10). Let’s take a moment to consider a few questions on orthodoxy.

**First, what exactly is Biblical orthodoxy?** Technically, the word orthodox and its variants do not occur specifically in the New Testament. The Greeks in the first century had the word *doxa* which means “glory, splendor, brilliance, honor, praise” and it occurs 166 times in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> Isaiah reminds us that the earth is full of God’s glory (Isa. 6:3) and Hebrews tells us that Jesus came to bring “*many sons to glory*” (Heb. 2:10). Christ brings many sons to glory as He speaks through a new covenant (Heb. 1:1-2; 8:13; 9:15). As we move forward in time, the adjective orthodox came into usage in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. It derives from *orthos*, meaning “right, true, straight” and *doxa*, meaning “opinion, thought, sentiment.”<sup>2</sup> In short, the noun orthodoxy came to mean “right opinion.”<sup>3</sup>

Biblical orthodoxy has a different nuance. It means “right glory” exercised in right belief and right opinion. Practically, we can know whether any given action or behavior is in keeping with God’s word (and therefore orthodox) or in violation of God’s word (and therefore heretical). Rich explanations abound in the text that distinguish true beliefs and opinions from false beliefs and opinions (Matt. 7:15; Acts 20:27-32; 2 Pet. 2:1). God Himself is the source of orthodoxy, righteousness, and right belief (Deut. 32:4; Ps. 18:2). Ultimately, His truth and opinion must rule the day (John 8:32; 14:6; 17:17). He has given humanity a word that is sufficient for every good work (Rom. 1:16-17; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Jude 3). When people walk in God’s light and in accordance with God’s glory, they are following Him and His orthodox word (1 Cor. 10:31).

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In contrast, when people walk contrary to God and His word they commit heresy. Peter speaks of false teachers who “*secretly bring in destructive heresies*” (2 Pet. 2:1). Heresy involves falling short of God’s glory and walking in darkness (Rom. 3:23; Eph. 2:1-7; 1 Jn. 1). One can commit heresy by doing less than what God expects (omissions) or by binding beyond what is commanded (Jam. 4:17; 1 Cor. 4:6). When one is Biblically orthodox, they are found in the center of God’s straight pathway, not leaning too far the right or the left (Matt. 3:3; 7:14). Being centrist, one neither adds to God’s word nor takes away from it (Matt. 3:3; 7:14; Rev. 22:18-19).

**Second, how is orthodoxy exercised in different settings?** In practicing orthodoxy, we see that God’s word engages every facet of human life (Ps. 119:11-16; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:3). God has set several human authorities and powers in different settings to judiciously advocate for righteousness and to decisively put down evil (1 Pet. 2:13-14). Consider the home, for instance. In the home, right leadership and right love are orthodox according to Scripture. Husbands are to lead their wives and love them as Christ loves the church (Eph. 5:22-25). Wives are to submit to their husbands “*as to the Lord*” (Eph. 5:22). If children come along, they are to obey and honor their parents (Eph. 6:1-2).

In the local congregation, elders determine orthodoxy in matters of advantage or expediency (1 Cor. 10:23). They are God’s stewards (Titus 1:7) exercising oversight as shepherds (1 Pet. 5:2-3). It is right and orthodox for members of the local body to obey these shepherds who uphold the word of God (Heb. 13:17). In the larger society, God entrusts ministers of righteousness in government to uphold virtue and put down evil by enacting laws in local and national jurisdictions (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-14). It is right and orthodox to obey local and national law. In each of these settings, a Biblical view of orthodoxy is bound to the word of God and His revealed will. Decisions in the home, government, or church fail to be orthodox when they fail to align with the word of God. When conflict comes and when powers assert deviations from the word of God (heresy), we must always take the high road and obey God over the will of mankind (Acts 5:29).

**Third, what does the Bible have to say about tradition and orthodoxy?** Traditions are practices that are repeated that become habits over a period of time. Certain human traditions can be instrumentally virtuous if they draw us closer to God and our neighbor or vices if they draw us away from

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## *A Biblical Look at Orthodoxy*

God or our neighbor (Matt. 22:37-39). The Bible is clear in distinguishing certain human traditions from Divine traditions. The New Testament sets forth Divine traditions that must be followed. Paul told the church at Corinth to “*maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you*” (1 Cor. 11:2). Similarly, he told the Thessalonians to “*stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter*” (2 The. 2:15). If a person did not walk in these traditions, Paul urged the faithful to “*keep away*” from them (2 The. 3:6). When one keeps these Divine traditions, they maintain Biblical orthodoxy.

In contrast, certain human traditions are at odds with Christ and His teaching. Take the Pharisees for instance. They took the law of Moses and placed additional burdens on people making matters of liberty matters of obligation (Matt. 23:4). They took the human tradition of washing hands before a meal and offered it as if it was a mandate and command of God (Matt. 15:1-9). Their standard of orthodoxy was not God’s. They offered their own ways as authoritative and profaned God in the process (Matt. 15:6). They were “*teaching as doctrines the commandments of men*” (Matt. 15:9). In certain instances, human tradition can take people captive (Col. 2:8).

However, it should be noted, that not all human traditions supplant the word of God. Some human traditions are faithful practices of God’s people (Rom. 14:23; 2 Cor. 13:5; 1 Jn. 3:20-21). A family might have a nightly tradition of worshipping God by singing, praying, and reading scripture together (Jn. 4:23-24). They do not bind this tradition to all people everywhere as a matter of orthodoxy. Other families may worship in the morning and others several times a day together. Worshipping in spirit and in truth is a matter of orthodoxy (Jn. 4:23-24). The timing, length of devotion, and occasion has some measure of liberty as families act in good conscience before God (1 Cor. 10:23). We uphold the motto that “The Bible teaches that (1) in matters of obligation, there must be unity; (2) in matters of option, there must be freedom, and (3) in all matters, there must be love.”<sup>4</sup>

In conclusion, Biblical orthodoxy rooted and grounded in Scripture is not a system of bondage where God wants to oppress those He loves. Jesus’ yoke is easy, and His burden is light (Matt. 11:30). By aligning our intentions, desires, and actions with His will, we press on toward the high calling of God through Christ Jesus. Let’s embrace Biblical orthodoxy so that our lives may be full and glorify our great God on high.

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apostolic traditions revealed by the Holy Spirit. And not all traditions are sinful. The time and location of the assembly on the first day of the week is a matter of man-made tradition. The use of songbooks and/or PowerPoint is a man-made tradition. The time during the worship assembly of observing the Lord’s Supper is a man-made tradition and usually differs from one congregation to another. The practice of having both an AM and PM worship service is a man-made tradition. While the above examples originated with men, they are not sinful.

However, it is possible that traditions which did not originate with the Lord or His Spirit filled apostles can become sinful. We must be careful as to where and how we draw the lines! We must use proper discernment of Scripture so as to not be guilty of making the word of God void (Matt. 15:8-9; Mk. 7:6-7). **Tradition** is a Biblical concept. May each of us handle God’s word correctly so as to not be in violation of His traditions.

### Works Cited

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**The Churches of Christ**

- Bible only (2 Pet. 1:3)
- Name of Christ (Rom. 16:16)
- Began in Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2-3; Acts 2:1-4)
- Established by Jesus (Matt. 16:18)
- Purchased with Jesus' blood (Acts 20:28)
- Married to Christ (Rom. 7:4)
- Established in the 1st century (Acts 2:47)
- Jesus the Head of the One Body (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4; 5:23)
- Added to the church by God (Acts 2:41, 47)

**Salvation**

- Saved by grace, through faith (Eph. 2:8-9)
- Not by faith alone (Jas. 2:14-26)
- Not by grace alone (Matt. 7:21)
- Belief and baptism (Mk. 16:16)
- Repentance and baptism (Acts 2:37-38)
- Belief, confession, and baptism (Acts 8:37-38)
- Heard, believed, baptized (Acts 18:8)
- Faith and baptism (Gal. 3:26-27)
- Baptism does save us (1 Pet. 3:21)

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