

CAN HUMAN TRADITIONS OR THE CIVIL GOVERNMENT NULLIFY GOD'S COMMANDMENT?

Romans 13:1-7. Acts 5:19

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*Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴ For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. ⁵ Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. ⁷ Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, **customs** to whom **customs**, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor - **Romans 13:1-7**.*

The term tradition is a noun which means the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on in this way. A **tradition** is a belief or behaviour passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past. Common examples include holidays (**October 1**) or impractical but socially meaningful clothes (*like lawyers' wigs or military officers' spurs*), but the idea has also been applied to social norms such as greetings (**Wikipedia**).

Civil authority or **civilian authority**, also known as **civilian government**, is the practical implementation of a State, other than its military units, that enforces law and order. It is also used to distinguish between religious authority and secular authority. The enforcement of law and order is typically the role of the police in modern states (**Wikipedia**). Lastly, the term nullify is a verb which implies an action that make legally null and void; invalidate.

Analysing Our Lesson

The word **tradition** can have two meanings, one secular and one religious. The secular understanding is that tradition is a long-established ritual, custom, or belief that is passed down from one generation to the next. For example, families have certain traditions in the way they celebrate holidays, birthdays, or vacations. Family traditions can be a healthy and positive way to maintain family cohesiveness. Social traditions can help create a sense of belonging within a community. A school may have a tradition that each year the incoming freshmen are escorted to the first football game by the seniors.

Following those traditions builds unity and helps maintain social norms. In the religious arena, however, tradition can blur the line between God's truth and man's invention, thereby confusing many. Christians should view religious tradition with caution.

Religious tradition was in full force during Jesus' earthly ministry. He often scolded the religious leaders, saying, "You nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down" (**Mark 7:13**). The scribes and the Pharisees had added so many of their own ideas to God's Law that the common people were confused and felt helpless to obey it all. In **Mark 7:6–8**, Jesus quoted from Isaiah to reprimand the religious leaders, saying, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'" Notice that the "commandments of men" were being taught as if they were divinely inspired "doctrines." And that was the problem.

One of the many traditions kept by the Pharisees of Jesus' day involved a ritualistic hand-washing before meals. The observance of this tradition had nothing to do with cleanliness; the Pharisees' concern was ceremonial purity. Once, when a Pharisee invited Jesus to eat with him, Jesus bypassed the tradition: "His host was amazed to see that he sat down to eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony required by Jewish custom" (**Luke 11:38, NLT**). Jesus had broken no law—nothing in the Mosaic commandments required such hand-washing—but the Pharisee expected conformity to the custom nonetheless. Jesus' outright disregard of that manmade tradition sets up a clear distinction between what is binding (*God's commands*) and what is not binding (*human tradition*).

Religious traditions that supersede or displace God's law have been around since the earliest days. They are still in full force within every religion as well as most congregations. For instance, a brother writes to the church seeking for assistance or a minister single handedly signed a letter seeking for help un-behalf of a sick brother or sister. Instead of focusing on the problem, we focus on the norm, the tradition, why should one person sign the letter? Ethically, we may be right, but notice, this is only but a tradition. Most of us have our favorite style of music, method of preaching, organizational structure, and serving routines that we accept without question. When faced with change, we might even feel a sense of moral outrage, as though changing the service format were a direct violation of God's commands. What we're really doing, perhaps without even realizing it, is guarding our own pet traditions, just as the Pharisees did. We can even become offended at Jesus, as the Pharisees did, when He disrupts our traditional view of what we think Christianity should look like (see **John 9:16**).

Scripture has layers of meaning. The more we delve into God's Word, the more we learn about God, and it often upsets our own ideas. Just when we think we have things figured out and we are certain that we are theologically, morally, and socially right about it all, we uncover another layer that shatters those confidences. When we cling to tradition—whether congregational, theological, or structural—as if it were God's Word, we keep the door closed on God's revelation of truth to us. He wants to keep surprising us with Who He is as we continue to pursue Him (**Jeremiah 29:13**). But religious tradition is often in the way. "That's not how we've always done it," is the battle cry of the traditionalists. Breaking tradition can be uncomfortable for many, just as it was for the Pharisees (**Matthew 5:33–34; Luke 6:26–27**). But when we can clearly see the dividing line

between our own traditions and God's truth, we stay humble and pliable as God continues to transform us into the image of His Son (**Romans 8:29**).

Traditions and God's Word

Traditions in themselves are not always bad, be it human or religious. Most times it is the human implementations that is the problem.

"Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you" (1 Corinthians 11:2).

In order to draw biblical conclusions on any topic, we must understand the fundamentals of language, the meaning of words, the proper use of grammar, and the gist of the context. These are the tools by which thoughts and concepts are conveyed. Paul wrote, *for who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words (1 Corinthians 2:11–13).*

Two important principles contained in these verses are relevant to our study of traditions, civil government and God's command. First, God has revealed His thoughts to inspired men through the Spirit so that we can "know" the mind of God. The Greek word for "know" in **1 Corinthians 2:12** is not *ginosko*, which means to have knowledge derived from experience or to reach a deduction based on reason. It is from the Greek *eidomen*, which means to see or understand. Second, God has used "words" (**1 Corinthians 2:13**), *logois*, to reveal His thoughts, or message. We cannot understand this message or know the mind of God based on human reason or deductions alone, but must depend on the meanings of "words," the vehicles through which He has revealed Himself. Based on the fact that God has conveyed His thoughts to us through "words," we must understand the meaning of His "words" in order to "know" the truths He has revealed. For this reason, word studies will sometimes be necessary in our study.

From the biblical perspective, a "tradition" is neither good nor bad in itself and must be judged by more than whether or not it is considered a "tradition." In the Bible the word "tradition" (Gk.: *paradosis*) contains the idea of "that which is handed down." The first question to ask is, "Who handed it down?" Did it come from God or men? The second question to ask is "Has God legislated this area?" Traditions in matters which God has not legislated are neutral so far as He is concerned. Nations, families, communities, schools, congregations of the Lord's church, and other groups can have traditions as long as they do not set aside God's Word.

Any *paradosis*—"tradition" or "ordinance"—which came from God, was revealed by the inspired writers of the Bible, and was practiced by the first Christians is to be practiced today (**1 Corinthians 11:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6**). No one should speak lightly of these traditions. However, any tradition which has been introduced by man which violates God's commandments is not to be practiced (**Matthew 15:3–9; Mark 7:6–13; Colossians 2:8**).

A tradition should be evaluated using the following tests.

- (1) Is this tradition handed down from Jesus? If so, we are to follow it (**Matthew 28:20**).
- (2) Is this practice condemned by God? (For example, see **1 John 5:21**.) If so, it must be rejected.
- (3) Has God stated a choice in the realm of the practice? If so, we are restricted by His choice. (See **Hebrews 7:12–14**.) If God's choices were not restrictive, His Word would be meaningless. Whenever a precedent is found in the Bible, it is to be considered binding and should be respected above human traditions.
- (4) If God has not made any choice in a particular realm, we have the freedom to accept or reject traditions that arise in that realm. (See **Romans 14:2, 3**.)

TRADITION AND CUSTOMS

Customs and traditions generally fall into the same categories. The terms have similar meanings: A "custom" is defined as "a practice followed by people of a particular group or region," and "tradition" is "the passing down of a culture from generation to generation, [especially] orally." A custom may include a practice or procedure that is preferred by a culture or society as a whole because that is the way they normally have done something. A tradition may be a practice that is respected within certain segments of society because it has been handed down from one generation to another.

The biblical view of customs falls within the following principles:

- (1) Some customs are to be practiced by Christians because they are institutions bound by society. The NASB may best convey the meaning of **1 Peter 2:13, 14**: "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right." A Christian is to submit to all human "institutions" (Gk.: *ktisis*; literally, "creation"). This would include laws and customs instituted by man, as long as they do not violate ordinances of God. (See **Acts 5:29**.)
- (2) Some customs are to be practiced by Christians in accordance with the culture in which they live. Doing so will enhance their opportunities to teach the lost in that society, even though the same practices may not be beneficial in another culture. When Paul was among the Gentiles, he lived as a Gentile; when he was among the Jews, he followed Jewish customs (**1 Corinthians 9:20**). Whichever customs he followed, he did nothing that would violate the teachings of Christ (**1 Corinthians 9:21**). Paul's practice is vividly illustrated by his choosing to circumcise Timothy and his refusal to circumcise Titus. In order to prevent any obstacle in preaching the gospel to the Jews who knew that Timothy had a Greek father and a Jewish mother, he circumcised Timothy (**Acts 16:3**). However, he refused to let the church circumcise Titus, who had no Jewish ancestors; the church had no right to encroach on Titus' freedom (**Galatians 2:3–5**). The circumcision of Timothy afforded Paul opportunities to preach to Jews who would not have listened to him if he had been traveling with an uncircumcised companion. On the other hand, allowing Titus to be circumcised would have sent a wrong message to the church, implying that Jewish customs and laws could be bound on Gentile Christians.
- (3) Christians are not to engage in customs that are forbidden by God. Even though Paul followed some of the customs of the Gentiles, he and other Christians were not

allowed to follow their customs of corrupt living. Peter wrote, *“For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousals, drinking parties and abominable idolatries” (1 Peter 4:3)*. Customs that violate God’s restrictions are forbidden for a Christian.

- (4) Some customs may be neutral. What a Christian does in these areas is simply a matter of his or her personal preferences. Christians have the choice to eat or not to eat the various foods that are customarily eaten in a society: *“Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him” (Romans 14:3)*. Christians have the right to follow a custom or not to follow a custom if the cause of Christ is not affected by his choice.
- (5) Christians may establish beneficial customs, but they are not binding. Both Jesus and Paul customarily went to the synagogues to teach (**Luke 4:16; Acts 17:2**). This was a good custom for them to practice, but such a practice is not binding on Christians.
- (6) Some societies have customs that God has commanded Christians to practice. These are bound on Christians because they are commanded by God, not because they are customs in society. The following are examples of customs in a culture that were bound on the Christian community.
 - a. The Jews had the custom of having elders as their leaders (**Matthew 15:2; 16:21; Luke 22:66; Acts 4:5**). Elders were appointed in the churches as well (**Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5**).
 - b. The Jews met every week (**Acts 13:27; 15:21**). Christians also had regular weekly meetings (**Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Hebrews 10:25**).
 - c. Two witnesses were needed by the Jews to settle a case (**Deuteronomy 17:6; Matthew 26:60**). Christians also are to have two or more witnesses to verify a fact or support an accusation (**2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19**).
 - d. Marriage was a custom for Gentiles and Jews. God expects only men and women who are married to live together (**Romans 7:2, 3; 1 Corinthians 7:2, 9**).

Proving that something was a custom within society does not negate it as a requirement from God. This is true of the binding nature of marriage, immersion for cleansing from sin, the husband/wife relationship, the woman’s role in the church, and any other practice commanded by God. The fact that God commanded something which was also a cultural practice or community custom would not make it less binding on Christians. Regardless of what society does or does not do, God’s commandments are binding. When Paul said, *“And do not be conformed to this world . . .” (Romans 12:2)*, he meant to avoid sinful practices in society; he did not mean for us to give up doing something God has commanded because it is a cultural practice. *“The Christian cannot simply dismiss a teaching because it is found to have a basis in the culture at the time.”*

In dealing with the role of the woman and her responsibilities, the Bible does not appeal to culture. Rather, the appeal is to God’s planned order in creation and to God’s law: For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman’s sake, but woman for the man’s sake (**1 Corinthians 11:8, 9; see 1 Timothy 2:13**).

Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says (1 Corinthians 14:34). Customs are never the stated basis of her role.

Let us consider an example. Some people have concluded that the “*holy kiss*” was only a custom and is not binding. Based on this example, they have sought to dismiss other commands of God as nonbinding customs. The statements concerning the “*holy kiss*” (**Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26**) and the “*kiss of love*” (**1 Peter 5:14**) regulated the way the greeting kiss was to be given; the kiss itself was not the command. Since people in that society commonly greeted each other in this way already, Paul did not need to command Christians to greet each other with a kiss. The injunction was given to govern the *kind* of kiss they were to give each other. It was to be a “*holy kiss*,” a “*kiss of love*,” not a sensual, lustful kiss.

A parent may say to his son, “*Drive safely.*” The emphasis is not on “*drive*,” but on “*safely.*” Knowing that the young man will be driving, the parent is not commanding him to drive. The emphasis on the word “*safely*” is intended to instruct him *how* to drive. The same was true with the holy kiss. The command was not to “*kiss*,” but to regulate the kiss that was commonly practiced in society. Others have sought to dismiss God’s commandments as mere customs based on their interpretation of Paul’s discussion of the woman’s head covering in **1 Corinthians 11:2–16**. This passage does not prove that God commanded Christians to observe customs. Women in the Greek and Roman world, unlike the women of the Near East, usually did not wear veils. **Richard Oster** stated, *from one perspective, everything in the Scriptures reflects culture. Whether it be holy kisses, water immersions, or crucifixions, these doctrines and practices were expressed in and through various cultures and the languages of various cultures. As such, it is inappropriate to pit “cultural” against “binding” or “eternal,” since some of the most fundamental doctrines of the Scriptures have “cultural dimensions.” The point of this is neither to say that nothing in the New Testament Scriptures is permanent nor to say that everything in the New Testament Scriptures is permanent. Rather, my point is that the most appropriate way to distinguish between what is binding and what is not binding for today from the New Testament is not the basis of a dichotomy between truth and culture. Since all biblical truth comes clothed in the garb of its culture, one would be better off, it seems, to realize that what we might identify as culture may, in fact, still be binding in the modern world.*

CONCLUSION

If we continue in the words of Jesus, we can learn the truth (**John 8:31, 32**). This should be our approach in all religious matters. The correct approach in seeking to learn God’s will for men and women is to study His Word with an open mind. Let us make a sincere effort to understand God’s tradition and His commandments concerning us. Truth is contained in God’s Word, not in the commandments and teachings of men (**Titus 1:14**; see **Colossians 2:22**).