

# Chapter 1

## The Value of Tradition

Tradition is defined as “the handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs, etc., from generation to generation....” Who of us would deny the importance of tradition? Where would we be without this legacy? Can we imagine being born into this world and having to start from scratch without any tradition? What an insurmountable task it would be without this inheritance we call tradition.

Most people seem to have little or no problem with tradition, but many of us recognize a problem with traditionalism. Traditionalism is defined as “adherence to tradition as authority, especially in matters of religion. A system of philosophy according to which all knowledge of religious truth is derived from divine revelation and received by traditional instruction.”

The facility of knowledge from others, whether past or present, is an important foundation for our own understanding. Intelligent people thirst for this knowledge so as to build an adequate substructure for their own creativity. As we are stimulated and fed by others, we develop our own existential concepts that contribute to the traditions of our own generation. New ideas are born that broaden and enrich the concepts of our forebears, and life continues with fresh understanding for the new era.

I doubt that there would be very many—if any—who would deny the necessity and facility of tradition. Such a denial might be analogous to being against apple pie or motherhood. I can foresee only one problem others might have concerning traditions: there are so many! As our world grows smaller and we become more familiar with the wide assortment of cultures, we can become overwhelmed by the many resources from which we have to learn.

Traditionalism, however, has become a plague on our house. While there are significant minorities who are unfruitful in their lives for lack of

root or tradition, there are many more who are being squelched or killed intellectually because of traditionalism. Those who insist, especially religious people, thwart many when there is only one way to act or think in life. This becomes especially twisted and life-threatening when humans propagate their "truth" with the claim of divine imprimatur.

I believe Jesus had this problem, too. The religious authorities of his day were not trying to share tradition, but rather, they were trying to impose their traditionalism on Jesus. It was in response to their imposition of traditionalism, not to the traditions, that Jesus reacted so vehemently. Each of the Gospel writers tells us several stories that bring this apparent struggle to the fore.

The most vivid story that comes to mind is the one in which Jesus "cleanses" the temple. It is recorded by all of the Gospel writers. Matthew sets the scene immediately in chapter twenty-one by saying, "Jesus went into the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling there." He portrays Jesus as using Scriptures from Isaiah and Jeremiah when he refers to Jesus as saying, "It is written in the Scriptures that God said, 'My temple will be called a house of prayer. But you are making it a hideout for thieves!'" Matthew then quickly tells us about Jesus healing the blind and crippled who came to him in the temple as an object lesson to portray the true meaning and purpose of that holy place. Mark's Gospel, after setting a similar stage, immediately thickens the plot by having the religious leaders "looking for a way to kill Jesus." Luke agrees that they "wanted to kill him, but they could not find a way to do it, because all the people kept listening to him, not wanting to miss a single word." John is the one who dramatizes the way Jesus did it. John says, "So he made a whip from cords and drove all the animals out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle; he overturned the tables of the money-changers and scattered their coins; and he ordered the men who sold the pigeons, 'Take them out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!'" John also embellishes the latter part by having them challenge Jesus to demonstrate his authority by performing a miracle! Jesus responds by saying, "Tear down this temple, and in three days I will build it again." In response, the religious leaders question how he could do this, since it took forty years to build the temple in the first place. This, of course, was not the only confrontation Jesus had with the leadership of his day. It appears, at times, that Jesus was constantly and consistently questioned about his authority to do, or not to do, what they perceived the Law required. Some of the other stories that come to mind: Jesus healing a paralyzed man who was given access to Jesus through a hole in the roof (Mark 2:1-12). Jesus' visit to the home of a tax collector after he indicated he would like to become a follower (Mark 2:13-17). Jesus being questioned about his and his followers' failure to properly observe

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the laws of fasting (Mark 2:18-22). Jesus and his disciples picking wheat on the Sabbath because they were hungry (Mark 2:23-28). Jesus healing a man with a paralyzed hand on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6).

These stories and a host of others will attest to Jesus' dilemma in his apparent heresy regarding the religious laws and customs of his day. The way Jesus taught on many occasions will also support my point. As a prelude to many of his teachings in the beginning of Matthew's Gospel we hear a phrase such as, "You have heard that people were told in the past...But now I tell you..." This may demonstrate that Jesus was trying to make a distinction between tradition and traditionalism. It was not unusual to hear other statements from Jesus such as, "Do not think that I have come to do away with the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets." It was not only characteristic of Jesus to defend and explain these laws and teachings, he also was an example of one who had studied and treasured them. The continuation of the previous phrase that is attributed to Jesus might help emphasize my point, "Remember that as long as heaven and earth last, not the least point nor the smallest detail of the Law will be done away with" (Matt. 5:17-18).

There were also other occasions when Jesus tried to tell the people, especially those who were supporters of his ministry, to follow and keep the law. Jesus healed a man of a dreaded skin disease who knelt down and begged him for help. After he healed the man, it was Jesus who said, "Listen, don't tell anyone about this. But go straight to the priest and let him examine you; then in order to prove to everyone that you are cured, offer the sacrifice that Moses ordered" (Mark 1:44). The fact that this story is remembered in Matthew and Luke may help reinforce this posture on the part of Jesus.

To me this is not only "good news," it is great news! In these ways Jesus, who is referred to by the writer of Hebrews as the "author and finisher of our faith," demonstrates how we also are to be led by the Holy Spirit. We too are gifted with the same presence of God within us, so we can grow from the traditions and experience of our ancestors to acquire the power of God in our lives for today! Through our knowledge and through reverent study of the traditions of our forebears as demonstrated by Jesus, the Holy Spirit will bring to our understanding new and appropriate traditions for our time. We can only grow in God's grace as long as we also study and treasure the traditions, but strongly resist the pressures of traditionalism! Jesus makes it clear that it is not heresy to reject traditionalism, but that it could be very deadly to resist the Holy Spirit. Perhaps as we look at the life of Jesus we will see even more clearly how God's Spirit and traditions become an excellent source for realizing the abundant life. We also might see how deadly it is to accede to traditionalism!

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Change is absolutely necessary if we are to grow and advance. For many people, however, change is difficult. Many Christian communities are very resistant to change. Someone has said that the seven last words of the church are "we never did it that way before!" This is another vivid example of the difference between tradition and traditionalism. The "tradition" for living is to learn how to accept the necessary changes one must experience in life. "Traditionalism" prevents individuals and groups from making these changes and becomes the destructive force that prevents new life. A living person or community cannot stay the same. They may honor and respect traditions from the past, but they cannot experience them in the same way day after day. There is no aspect or facet of our lives exempt from change. We must change in thought, word, and deed.