

“Should Churches be Traditional or Non-Traditional?”

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Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. 2 Thessalonians 3:6

Traditional versus non-traditional is a big debate in our day. Many churches promote themselves either as being a “traditional” church or, at the opposite end, a “non-traditional” church. Both kinds of churches assume something about the word *traditional*—it is either good or bad, attractive or unattractive. In reality, the issue of traditions and traditionalism is more difficult than such blanket assumptions.

Biblically speaking, the concept of traditions is used both favorably and unfavorably. In its most favorable usage it actually refers to the teachings that were handed to the churches by the apostles. This is what Paul is referring to in 2 Thessalonians 3:6 (cf. 2:15; 1 Cor. 11:2). Tradition in this sense refers to biblically-mandated beliefs and practices which must be accepted. Practically speaking then, all genuine Bible believers must be traditional to some degree.

There is also a biblical use of tradition that refers to the generally accepted practices or customs of Bible-believing assemblies that are compatible with biblical principles and practices. In other words, the practice itself was not “handed down,” but it is compatible with a biblical principle. I believe an example of this is found in the instructions regarding headcoverings in 1 Corinthians 11. Although it is a notoriously difficult passage, Paul ties his instruction to the Corinthians to the prevailing practice of the churches (v. 16). While we may debate the precise meaning of this passage, my point is simply to show that for Paul the customs of the churches affected his argument. This would lead me to conclude that we should be careful not to adopt a radical anti-tradition stance.

The Bible also warns us about a dangerous kind of traditionalism. The Lord Jesus confronted the Pharisees of His day about the fact that they had elevated their own traditions to a place of higher authority than the Scriptures. In Matthew 15:3 He pointedly confronted them with these words, “Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” In this case traditionalism actually resulted in disobedience because the tradition replaced the truth of Scripture. The Apostle Paul warned the Colossians about the dangerous potential of man-made traditions (2:8). By calling these teachings the “tradition of

men,” he is clearly indicating that these were not biblical, nor did they spring from biblical principles.

So, all of this means that the labels *traditional* and *non-traditional* **in themselves** are not as helpful as they seem. Bible-believing people are by definition traditional—we accept the traditions recorded in the Scriptures that have been handed down to us by the apostles. And Bible-believing people by definition should be opposed to man-made traditions that rise to a place of authority that rivals or excels the Scriptures—we must be committed to the concept of Scripture alone (versus Scripture plus tradition). But the Bible itself commands us to recognize and emulate the example of those who are following the teachings of Scripture (1 Cor. 11:16; Phil. 3:17). The customs and practices of Bible-believing people should not be discarded without careful consideration. A complete rejection of all tradition (in the broader definition) is not only inconsistent with these biblical exhortations, it is not helpful to God’s people. Constantly throwing aside practical applications of biblical truth is an unwise path. We ought to learn from those who have gone before us and benefit from their wisdom, not toss it aside unthinkingly.

On the other hand, we must also be careful also to guard ourselves against uncritical traditionalism. A tradition that started well can sometimes take God’s people off course if its connection to biblical principle becomes obscured through time or shifting cultural factors. Unless the tradition itself is explicitly biblical, then it is an application of the Bible to a particular circumstance, time, and place. If the circumstance, time, and place warrant changes in the application, then our commitment to being biblical means we must be willing to change. Biblical principles don’t change, but their application does. Most “traditions” are old applications that became fixed in place. A wise approach would be to acknowledge and affirm the principles upon which the application/tradition is built, but, if needed, to “update” the application (begin a new tradition!).

DBTS is unashamed to be called a separatist fundamentalist institution. As such, we are committed to the perpetuation of the apostolic traditions handed down in Scripture. Additionally, we are very cautious about the radical anti-traditional mindset of our day. We don’t think change for change’s sake is good. Conservative, Bible-believing people have left us a great heritage and we are not inclined to part with it thoughtlessly. But we also recognize there is an opposite danger to be concerned about as well. Some people, claiming to represent Fundamentalism, are making their “traditions” equal to or greater than the authority of the Bible itself. Fundamentalism does not exist to preserve traditional applications of the Bible. It exists to proclaim and perpetuate biblical truth, and to make fresh application of that truth in a 21st century context. In other words, some traditions (those outlined in Scripture) can never change, while others (those which are applications of the Bible) will necessarily change in order to adjust to the changes in the culture around us. We must be committed to tradition without becoming traditionalists!