

Custom (ethos)

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The New Testament word custom (*ethos*) means the way we are used to doing things. A custom might be good or bad but it is always a human attempt to achieve certain social or psychological ends through ordering communal behavior.

The words law (*entole*) and custom (*ethos*) differ as medicine differs from flavoring. The pressures of law and custom look alike in their effects. The clothing they wear is uniform, but the self within the garment is different. God does not command custom. It is from and by human design.

Luke speaks more of custom than any other New Testament writer. He seals his story of Jesus at the beginning and end with reference to customary observance. Immediately after dating the events in the reign of Herod, Luke locates the genesis of the whole John and Jesus movement in "the custom of the priesthood" (1:9). It was not Zechariah's spontaneous action but his involvement in priestly custom which brought him before the angel of the Lord. After the birth of Jesus, his parents "brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the law" (2:27), thereby occasioning the inspired utterances of Simeon and Anna. The saturation in custom is reinforced when Jesus is 12 years old by reference to his parents traveling to Jerusalem "according to custom" (2:42).

After Jesus' death, Luke describes the women following the Jewish custom of preparing spices and ointment for the body (23:56), though it is John who calls this the "burial custom of the Jews" (John 20:40). While the customs before the ministry of Jesus serve to make the way ready for him, the customs after his death do not fit the situation. Incarnation can accept and use

custom but resurrection transcends custom.

In the Book of Acts Luke examines the conscientious but incompetent attempt of the young church to persevere in the customs of its environment. It was not disobedience to Jewish or Roman law which got Christianity into trouble. It was inattentiveness to both Jewish and Roman customs. Where it did not repudiate, it often ignored. It did not exchange Jewish for pagan worship. That would have won it supporters as well as opponents. It did not reject Jewish beliefs for Roman philosophy. That would have given it a place in the stoa when it was thrown out of the synagogue. But Christianity innocently accepted the Jewish Scriptures and the pagan quest for truth and filled both with Jesus Christ. It did not so much attack ancient custom as revitalize it—to the indignation and dismay of people who cared less for the new wine than they did for the old wineskins.

The effective agent of custom is peer pressure, something which is not unique to our century. The New Testament church had to formulate its ideas and inculcate its practices under the steady pressure of both Jewish and pagan customs. We see this most clearly in Acts. The church's first martyr, Stephen, was accused of saying that Jesus would destroy the Temple and "change the customs which Moses delivered to us" (Acts 6:14). Paul and Silas were dragged before the rulers at Philippi accused of advocating "customs which it is not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice" (16:21). Thus, Christians were caught between the millstones of Roman and Jewish customs. Paul, as we know, tried to fit himself to all customs in order to win all to the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). And Acts does show him trying to shake off the accusation of teaching all

the Jews "not to observe the customs" (Acts 21:21). He follows the instruction of those who help him show that he lived in observance of the law (21:17-26). And later he welcomed the opportunity to have his actions judged by Aquila who was "especially familiar with the customs and controversies of the Jews" (26:3). Finally, he told the Jews in Rome that he had "done nothing against the people or the customs of our fathers" (28:17). In Paul, we see the early church trying to respect customs which it was unable to consider binding law. In New Testament times, the church found it a difficult task.

Christianity had to define its essence, articulate its message, and exhibit its vitality among people who had set agendas, predisposed values, and stereotyped responses. There was little dedication to truth in Philippi or Jerusalem; there was much affection for continuity.

Apparently, it was as true in New Testament times as it is today that people become infuriated more by the violation of custom than by violation of the law. This may be because customs are human devices blessed by human activity and serving human purposes. You wound our pride when you disregard our customs.

The tendency of custom to subvert command in the church today may be seen in our attitudes toward the Communion. Although the New Testament shows Jesus telling his followers to eat and drink in memory of him to proclaim his death for the forgiveness of sin (Matthew 26:26-29; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26), the Communion is popularly described in terms of spiritual nourishment for the communicant, a customary Romantic interpretation.

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