



SOME WORDS ABOUT...

Tradition (*paradosis*)

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The word "tradition" (*paradosis*) is used only 13 times in the New Testament, yet it has a strong associated importance because it enlarges our understanding of three other words: commandment, law, and teaching.

Jesus and Tradition

In Mark 7:1-13, the Pharisees confront Jesus with the fact that his disciples do not walk in the tradition (*paradosis*) of the elders. Jesus replies with a quotation from Isaiah 29:13 (7:6-7). He then gives them a four-part literary figure: teachings (*didaskalias*); commandments (*entalmata*); law (*entole*); and tradition (*paradosis*).

Teachings were the imparted essence of one's beliefs and techniques of living. Schools of teaching—Stoics, Pharisees, Cynics, and Therapeutae—included outlooks on the nature of life and regulations embodying those outlooks.

Commandments were the rule for daily living which expressed the practical application of a set of teachings. With Isaiah, Jesus denounced the reversal of this process, the conforming of teachings to humanly developed practices.

Law was the code of obligations directing social activity. Political law prescribed one's relation to the state; divine law prescribed one's relation to God.

Tradition was the pattern of social activity passed on from one generation to another.

The Pharisees dealt with the demands of God upon life, and Jesus said that they corrupted the relationship between God and the people of God by substituting human tradition for divine obsession.

Paul and Tradition

After reading Jesus' scathing denunciation of placing tradition—which is of human construction—before divine law, one is prepared to discover that Paul would have agreed. He did. But one cannot appreciate Paul's appropriation of Jesus' teachings if one sees him picking up signals from Jesus and amplifying them. There is nothing mechanical in Paul's reception of Jesus or his teachings. Nor is there anything routine in his transmission of either. Paul did not let "tradition" become a buzz word. He understood what Jesus was denouncing, why he was denouncing it, and the logic inherent in that denunciation. But Paul did not oversimplify Jesus as saying simply "tradition is bad."

Before his conversion, Paul had been an arch traditionalist (Galatians 1:14). His fondness for tradition did not cease when he became a follower of Jesus. The type of tradition changed but not the attraction. One cannot appreciate the whole implication of Paul's priorities if one assumes that he ever had a dislike of tradition. On the contrary, Paul was the great teacher of tradition.

1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is the most revealing and emphatic dissertation on tradition by Paul. He begins, "I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions (*paradosis*) even as I have delivered them to you." In what follows, the word tradition refers to the custom described (women cover their heads in church and men do not), the arguments advanced in support of the custom, and the reasoning which enforced the arguments. The custom itself, the arguments, and the reasoning were all part of the tradition. They were not law. They were not to be revered as law. They were to be respected—but neither despised nor venerated. Paul concludes his discussion by saying, "If any-

one is disposed to be contentious, we recognize no other practice, nor do the churches of God."

Paul describes another tradition in 2 Thessalonians 3:7-11, a "tradition that you received from us" (3:6). It is his personal command (3:6, 12) that this tradition be respected. Indeed, all the traditions taught by Paul (2:15) are to be followed.

Paul's Priorities

When Paul speaks of tradition, he speaks of things which promote the reputation, wholeness, and social attractiveness of the church. When he speaks of the relation of Christians to Christ, as in Colossians 2:6-7, he brushes aside tradition and says, "See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition" (2:8). Whether it be traditions with reference to food (2:16), religious celebration (2:16), the worship of angels (2:18), or taboos (2:21), such traditions do not affect the relation of Christians with Jesus Christ.

To enjoy tradition can be a wholesome sharing of experience past and present, an affirmation of our commonality. But to live for tradition is to fail to live at all, and to coerce by tradition is to oppress where we should support. If there is no law that can give life (Galatians 3:21), then what can tradition give? Not even a gesture pointing to life.

Paul realized that gospel, law, and tradition exist on three different levels. He did not compare them and find gospel superior. The three are not comparable. As water, a picture of water, and a description of the picture of water differ not in degree but in kind, so do the gospel, law, and tradition. The church is committed to the gospel.

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