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The Reflector

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Traditional Party Line

Warren E. Berkley

Years ago, a man from a neighboring church came to the city where I was located, walked into my office and immediately said, “OK, what is your position on the marriage question?” I said, “...whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.” His response? “Yeah, the traditional party line!”

I said, “Wait a minute. All I did was quote Matthew 19:9; I’ve just repeated the words of Christ!” He said, “Well, but is that all the truth?” Almost as he said that, he heard what he had said! “I mean ... I mean, I know Jesus taught the truth ...” His words had already betrayed him. Rather than submit to the clear teaching of Jesus he had chosen to hurl an accusation that impugned my beliefs. But what did he mean by the phrase “traditional party line?” Behind this charge may be at least one of four attitudes:

1. I dont like what you teach, I wont accept it so Ill distract you from discussing the Bible by making this charge. This was certainly the case with the man above. If I spent time defending myself and why I believed what I believed that was time not spent discussing what Matthew 19:9 means. Clever tactic, yes? If I have close friends or relatives who want to marry, naturally I dont like to hear someone teach something that would question that union. And without any doubt, if I am contemplating a relationship, and you tell me I shouldnt, I wont like that. But instead of just saying, “I dont like what

you are teaching,” it is much easier (and sometimes more effective) to charge “Well, you are just repeating the traditional party line.”

2. There are many others who have taught this for many years. So what? The fact that a teaching has been held for years does not necessarily prove it is wrong. Being traditional is not always bad. 2 Thessalonians urges us to hold the traditions of the apostles. There are thousands of brethren who have taught the necessity of repentance and baptism for many generations. This says nothing about the validity of repentance and baptism. The number of preachers and/or writers who have taught a proposition does not minimize its validity, or prove it. Likewise, the number of years something has been taught neither diminishes its truthfulness, nor makes it true.

3. You havent really studied, and you dont really have your own convictions; you have blindly accepted the word of others. I would guess this is what is behind the “traditional party line” charge most of time. The charge then is a way of saying that I can read your heart and know your motives. It also says that I know that you are not sincere, nor a truth seeker. The only person qualified to make such a charge is the one who is able not only to know what we teach, but why we teach it. If you are able to know (have real evidence) that someone has put himself under the dominion of others; if you are certain that a man prefers “popular brotherhood thought” (whatever that is) to personal Bible study, then perhaps you are equipped to make this charge.

4. I dont have any real arguments or response to what you are teaching. Here is the real problem the man described above had. He had nothing to say in response to Matthew 19:9, knew what he was doing was wrong, but wanted to do it anyway. So, he threw charges around to try to save face. When I tell people my belief that the only man (with a living mate) free to remarry is the one who has put away his spouse for fornication I want them show me the error of my position (if it is error). Dont make mindless charges - come to the scriptures and teach me the truth. Help me to see where Ive been deceived or made a mistake in my study. Lead me through the passages that pertain to this. Give me something substantial instead of just charging me as a slave to human opinion or party pressure. Often, though, when a disputant makes the charge of “traditional party line,” he is reacting in frustration over his or her lack of substantial biblical arguments.

I am not prepared to ignore a real danger here. There is a temptation to preach what others are preaching; there is the sin of listening to men and ignoring God; and there is such a thing as a Pharisaic, party-spirit mentality. But when you teach what the Lord said in Matthew 19:9, or anywhere else, because you believe in the Lord and want to stand where He stands, dont be intimidated by the charge of submitting to the “party line.” And the fact that 95% of the preachers you know and respect teach the same thing is never a reason to throw it out. What do you think?

My good friend Harold Turner wrote about this a few years ago in a journal. His conclusion fits well here: “Personally, I dont give two hoots about traditional or nontraditional in the whole thing, and would like to make an appeal to anyone who might be feeling the pressure of the nontraditional use of the word traditional these days. Dont be too quick to apologize for preaching and teaching that which has characteristically been taught, for there is at least an outside chance that the reason that bit of teaching is traditional is because it is so.” ■

Something for “Tradition Busters” to Think About....

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

There are some so bent on escaping the shackles of what they term “church of Christ tradition,” that they automatically publicly question anything that has been taught and/or practiced in the past by “churches of Christ.” No one should accept anything *just* because it has been generally taught by members of “churches of Christ.” By the same token why should one reject some doctrine *just* because it has been long taught and practices among “churches of Christ.” What we all must be concerned about is the *origin* of these “traditions.” Did they originate with God and handed down by the apostles and on down to us through teaching. (2 Tim. 2:2).

We have the scriptures to check if they originated with the apostles or some other source. This requires more than just superficial reading, but studying and reasoning from the scriptures (Acts 17:2). If the reasoning is sound one arrives at the truth, if it is faulty he does not. That is what Philip did with eunuch. He took Isaiah 53, which does not mention Jesus, and used it as the starting point and by reasoning showed that Jesus of Nazareth, though not mentioned by name, was the fulfillment.

What I have noticed is that these “tradition busters” (yes, this is a label, but I think an accurate one) usually just swap the “traditions” they reject for the traditions of whoever their favorite authors may be. Also, sometimes these “church of Christ” traditions are rejected because they interfere with their own traditional views of what should be permitted in the name “Christian liberty.”

I had as soon have “church of Christ” tradition as “Calvinist” traditions or “Evangelical” traditions, other “denominational” traditions or the traditional mores of a community.

Of course, what I really need is the “the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle” from the apostles. (2 Thess. 2:15). If any of the aforementioned “traditions” are

solidly rooted in the traditions mentioned in this verse I can safely accept them. If not, then reject them. ■

In Search of Relevance

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

The search for relevance is perennial in religious circles. Each generation produces those who regard the preaching and practices of their predecessors irrelevant to their needs. This is true even among those who profess to be New Testament Christians. Some are demanding new and exciting ideas expressed in new ways. This has been the cry of many since the early 50's as the institutional controversy began to sweep across the land.

Leroy Brownlow, in his *“Sermons You Can Preach”* outline book (1958), published an outline called *“Give Us Something Practical.”* He ably dealt with the plea in those days, for more “practical” and less “doctrinal” preaching. He aptly shows that nothing can be more practical and suitable to man's real needs than those old fundamental doctrinal themes that we have preached for years.

We are beginning to see the same thought pattern evolving among some “non-institutional” brethren today. Consequently, many are abandoning doctrinal sermons and classes, especially those that contrast sound doctrine with false doctrine, in favor of “practical” or “real life situation” themes.

Many topics publicized for evangelism and edification reflect a subtle shift away from emphasizing salvation from sin, staying saved, preparing for heaven, and avoiding hell. Improving man's “quality of life” on earth is fast becoming the main objective of preaching and teaching. Why? The average person has little interest in his real spiritual and eternal needs. He wants to know how we can make him *happy now* — feel good about himself *now*, always. He is interested in the present, not the hereafter. So, to be relevant, churches and preachers think that most of their

teaching must address the day to day concerns of people in the church and the community at large — concerns that mostly relate to things of the temporal and fleshly side of man.

Many more liberal churches have “ministries” for all of man's temporal needs and interests. Many of these churches have a counselor or director for just about any physical, social and psychological need (real or perceived) in society. This has become known as the *social gospel*.

Brother Sewell Hall aptly summed up our need to stay away from the social gospel approach: “The real problems of the world are spiritual. The local church is God's organization for dealing with such problems and the gospel of Christ is the means He has given us with which to confront them. Ten thousand other organizations are addressing the social problems of our day, using every conceivable resource. *It is urgent that we not allow ourselves to be distracted from our unique mission or disillusioned with God's unique method.*” (*Guardian of Truth*, January 2, 1986, p. 12 — Emphasis mine, EOB).

Again, we sincerely believe that some “conservative” brethren are unwittingly slipping over into the social gospel. The teaching done by more than a few congregations points in that direction. It deals more with stress than sin. It emphasizes man's social and physical well-being more than his spiritual welfare. It gives more attention to social relationships than spiritual relationships. Its primary objective is finding happiness and contentment in this present world. It is no longer designed to convict men and women of their sins, but to make them feel good about themselves as they are.

No one denies that the Bible deals with stress, social relationships, and happiness. However, the gospel does not put the emphasis upon these things. The New Testament preachers did not go out preaching Christ as the answer to stress and the key to happiness, but Christ as the author of salvation and the answer to sin. That salvation from sin improves happiness and relieves stress, no one

denies. We can even see from the Bible that such was the case. Still, that is not where we should place the emphasis. The New Testament church was not a recreational, social, nor psychiatric center for the community. It was a spiritual institution with a higher mission.

One symptom of some liver diseases is a headache. Suppose there is an out break of liver disease in the community. Many people are concerned about their headaches. A concerned doctor offers his help. If the doctor mostly attends to the patient's immediate interest (the headache), he will not really help the person. He may give him a pain-reliever, making him feel better for a while. An incompetent doctor may even think he has done his job. After all, the man went home feeling good about the matter. A good doctor would focus most of his attention on the diseased liver. He would deal with the headache only in the context of the liver disease. When this concerned doctor approaches such patients they may not know that they have diseased livers. They are only concerned about their headaches. At this point, they would probably consider any talk about the liver to be irrelevant. Should the doctor play to their immediate interest and shy away from talking about liver disease? Or should he inform them of their real problem and try to convince them to be treated for liver disease? I think we all know the answer.

An individual's spiritual condition may cause him social, psychological, and even physical problems and pain. The gospel deals with the spiritual problem (sin). We will help any problems caused by sin when we take care of the sin. If one still has such problems after taking care of his sin, then physical, psychological, or social therapy may be in order. However, this is not the work of the church or preachers of the gospel. Others can do the job much better.

So, brethren let's get back to emphasizing the gospel of Christ as the power of God to save man. It saves him from sin and the wrath to come. It saves him for a life of godliness and hope in the

midst of a troubled world. It will eventually save him eternally in heaven.

Let's get back to talking about the church of Christ as that body made up of those saved from sin. Let's get back to emphasizing submission to the authority of Christ as the means of avoiding sin. Let's get back to stressing the importance of following the New Testament pattern in all our spiritual activities, as individuals and as congregations. Let's get back to emphasizing how men and women should be faithful to Christ, the author of their salvation, to go to heaven.

Let's get back to teaching folks the true gospel with its results as compared to perverted gospels with their results (Gal. 1:8-10). Let's put the "doctrine," the "reprove" and the "rebuke" back with the "longsuffering" and the "exhort" in Paul's charge to "preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:1-4).

One can find fulfillment for his social, physical and emotional aspirations through a variety of programs offered in the community. However, he can find salvation from sin, the hope of eternal life and the truth by which he must go to heaven only in the gospel of Christ properly preached. This is the truth of which the church of Christ is the pillar and ground. (1 Tim. 3:15). What could be more relevant than that?

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While a student at Freed Hardeman College in the 1950's, a joke going around the dorm was that the PR director returned from a meeting and was asked how the meeting went. His alleged reply, "A great and wonderful meeting, 5 baptisms, 3 restorations and 45 pledges to come to FHC." This was just a joke made up by the boys in the dorm for a good laugh. But the moral of the story is no laughing matter.

When secular business people use evangelism to promote and/or sell their products and services it is serious business, regardless of the nature of their products or services. – EOB