

Tradition

Theory & Application

Gregory A. Smith • November, 1997

Introduction

Several months ago the Lord burdened me with an interest in the subject of tradition, with particular application to ministry in independent Baptist churches. I proceeded to launch into a study of all the biblical references to the concept of tradition. This article summarizes the results of that study.

Biblical Terms

The word *tradition* never appears in the King James Version Old Testament. Speculation on the lack of such occurrences is a theological matter that exceeds the scope of this investigation. Two Greek terms underlie the New Testament concept of tradition.

Paradidomi (παραδιδωμι)

This term is commonly used in the New Testament in reference to “the handing over of Jesus, e.g., by Judas in Mk. 14:10, by the Sanhedrin to Pilate in Mk. 15:1, by Pilate to the people’s will in Lk. 23:25 and to the soldiers for execution in Mk. 15:15” (Büchsel “Paradidomi” 167). It also conveys the meaning of giving over, giving up, and delivering (167-68).

Paradosis (παραδωσις)

Unger defines *paradosis* as “[a] giving over either by word of mouth or in writing; objectively, what is delivered, as Paul’s teaching . . .” (1299). Büchsel expands: “This word for ‘tradition’ means ‘what is transmitted’ rather than ‘transmission’ in the NT” (“Paradosis” 168). It is used in various applications, both positive and negative.

Biblical Texts

There are fifteen texts in the New Testament that use *paradosis* and/or *paradidomi* in reference to tradition. While *paradosis* consistently refers to a sociological phenomenon, the semantic domain of *paradidomi* is broader, including the physical act of handing over people (e.g., Mt 26.21) and property (e.g., Mt 25.14), as well as the transmission of tradition (e.g., 1 Cor 11.2). The relevant texts are listed here in biblical order, with tradition-related comments following each entry. Greek terms referring to tradition are supplied in rounded brackets in the course of the text. Texts have been omitted which use *paradidomi* other than in reference to the transmission of tradition.

Matthew 15.1-11

- 1 Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying,
- 2 Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition *{paradosis}* of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.
- 3 But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition *{paradosis}*?
- 4 For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death.
- 5 But ye say, Whosoever shall say to [his] father or [his] mother, [It is] a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me;
- 6 And honour not his father or his mother, [he shall be free]. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition *{paradosis}*.
- 7 [Ye] hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying,
- 8 This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with [their] lips; but their heart is far from me.
- 9 But in vain they do worship me, teaching [for] doctrines the commandments of men.
- 10 And he called the multitude, and said unto them, Hear, and understand:
- 11 Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man.

- The exercise of Christian liberty sometimes results in violation of human religious tradition. Conversely, observance of human tradition sometimes results in violation of divine commands revealed in scripture.
- Not all religious traditions are God-honoring. It is quite possible to give the appearance of pleasing God while failing to do so in truth.
- Religious tradition becomes a spiritual hindrance when it is exalted to the level of a biblical command.

Mark 7.1-13

- 1 Then came together unto him the Pharisees, and certain of the scribes, which came from Jerusalem.
- 2 And when they saw some of his disciples eat bread with defiled, that is to say, with unwashen, hands, they found fault.
- 3 For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash [their] hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition *{paradosis}* of the elders.
- 4 And [when they come] from the market, except they wash, they eat not. And many other things there be, which they have received to hold, [as] the washing of cups, and pots, brasen vessels, and of tables.
- 5 Then the Pharisees and scribes asked him, Why walk not thy disciples according to the tradition *{paradosis}* of the elders, but eat bread with unwashen hands?
- 6 He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with [their] lips, but their heart is far from me.
- 7 Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching [for] doctrines the commandments of men.

- 8 For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, [as] the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do.
- 9 And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition {*paradosis*}.
- 10 For Moses said, Honour thy father and thy mother; and, Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death:
- 11 But ye say, If a man shall say to his father or mother, [It is] Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; [he shall be free].
- 12 And ye suffer him no more to do ought for his father or his mother;
- 13 Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition {*paradosis*}, which ye have delivered {*paradidomi*}: and many such like things do ye.

- Religious tradition is concerned with external requisites rather than internal reality. It gives great attention to minute detail, and lends itself to acid tests of supposed spirituality.
- Biblical behavior sometimes disregards tradition, and when it does, it often generates conflict with members of the religious community.
- The fulfillment of outward religious forms cannot be equated with true godliness; in fact, it is possible to honor religious tradition yet be devoid of a personal, intimate relationship with God. Such hypocrisy is vain. These truths were foreseen in the Old Testament by the prophet Isaiah.
- Observance of human tradition sometimes constitutes the rejection of a divine command.

Luke 1.1-4

- 1 Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us,
 - 2 Even as they delivered {*paradidomi*} them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word;
 - 3 It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus,
 - 4 That thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.
- Tradition—in both oral and written forms—has historically been one of the primary means of propagation of the Christian message. Such was the case of Luke’s account of the life and ministry of Jesus. The witness was handed over to him in verbal form by eyewitnesses, and from him in written form to the people of God.

Acts 6.12-14

- 12 And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon [him], and caught him, and brought [him] to the council,
- 13 And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:
- 14 For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs {*ethos*} which Moses delivered {*paradidomi*} us.

- Stephen was accused of attempting to change the customs (i.e., laws) which the Jews had practiced since the time of Moses. His preaching and miracles confronted their vain traditions, and they could not resist his power. In self-defense, they resorted to violence in their efforts to silence him. This story illustrates well the conflict between obedience to God and observance of human tradition.

Acts 16.4-5

- 4 And as they went through the cities, they delivered *{paradidomi}* them the decrees *{dogma}* for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem.
 - 5 And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily.
- Following the council at Jerusalem, Paul and Silas visited various cities, handing down to the Gentile converts the resolutions of the council regarding their duty to the Law of Moses. Thus the decrees of the council, which were imposed on the Gentile believers, became traditions that were delivered in order to maintain the unity of the body of Christ at large.

Romans 6.15-18

- 15 What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid.
 - 16 Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?
 - 17 But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine *{didache}* which was delivered *{paradidomi}* you.
 - 18 Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness.
- The message of the liberating grace of God is here referred to as tradition, particularly as that body of teaching which is handed over from believer to unbeliever for the purpose of drawing the latter to repentance from sin.
 - In this sense, tradition is God-honoring, and can never justifiably be altered.

1 Corinthians 11.2

- 2 Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances *{paradosis}*, as I delivered *{paradidomi}* [them] to you.
- Tradition, in the sense here referred to, is worthy of faithful observance. In fact, Paul commends the Corinthians for their adherence to the principles he had taught them.
 - The preservation of God-honoring traditions presupposes a collective memory of that which has been inherited from the past.

1 Corinthians 11.23-25

- 23 For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered *{paradidomi}* unto you, That the Lord Jesus the [same] night in which he was betrayed *{paradidomi}* took bread:
- 24 And when he had given thanks, he brake [it], and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.

25 After the same manner also [he took] the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink [it], in remembrance of me.

- The account of the institution of the Lord's Supper was handed over (as a tradition) from Paul to the Corinthian church. Paul relayed it just as he had received it from the Lord himself. In this case, the "tradition" of a particular historical account was entrusted to man by God. Believers thus became responsible to make remembrance of Christ's sacrificial offering by means of honoring a God-ordained tradition, the Lord's Supper.

Galatians 1.11-14

11 But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man.
12 For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught [it], but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.
13 For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it:
14 And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions {*paradosis*} of my fathers.

- The beliefs and practices of Judaism, as exemplified in Paul's life before his conversion to Christ, are referred to as "traditions."
- Spiritual zeal for erroneous religious traditions does not diminish the error of such traditions.
- The superiority of divine revelation to human religious tradition is clearly established. This is particularly true in reference to the gospel.

Colossians 2.6-9

6 As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, [so] walk ye in him:
7 Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.
8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition {*paradosis*} of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.
9 For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.

- Tradition can be a very negative thing. For example, it can be antagonistic to the faith, to godly teaching, and to Christ himself. Stated from a different perspective, it can be associated with philosophy, vain deceit, and worldly principles.

2 Thessalonians 2.13-15

13 But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth:
14 Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.
15 Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions {*paradosis*} which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.

- There is a vital link between tradition and the teaching of spiritual truth. Traditions that are worth keeping are worth being taught. Conversely, no tradition that lacks a doctrinal (i.e., didactic, teaching) basis should be handed down to successive generations of believers. In other words, traditions should be perpetuated deliberately, not haphazardly. On the other hand, believers are commanded to observe traditions which are based in biblical doctrine.
- Two sources of doctrine-based tradition are validated here: personal ministry (“by word”) and recorded revelation (“our epistle”).
- It is implied that God-honoring traditions will bear a close relation to the saving truth of the gospel.

2 Thessalonians 3.6-12

- 6 Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition {*paradosis*} which he received of us.
 - 7 For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you;
 - 8 Neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you:
 - 9 Not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an ensample unto you to follow us.
 - 10 For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.
 - 11 For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies.
 - 12 Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread.
- The observance of certain traditions is commanded as a necessary part of normal Christian behavior.
 - One tradition that ought to be perpetuated among Christians is that of making an honest living.
 - Tradition is to be handed down by example as well as by direct instruction.

1 Peter 1.18-19

- 18 Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, [as] silver and gold, from your vain conversation [received] by tradition {*paradosis*} from your fathers;
 - 19 But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot:
- Tradition is transmitted rather blindly from one generation to the next, with little regard for its relation to spiritual things.
 - Tradition can serve as a binding force, preventing one from experiencing the liberating effects of redemption. As such, it is antagonistic to Christ and his atoning blood.

2 Peter 2.20-22

20 For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning.

21 For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known [it], to turn from the holy commandment {*entole*} delivered {*paradidomi*} unto them.

22 But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog [is] turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.

- It is of utmost importance that those who profess to know Christ demonstrate a steadfast commitment to holiness. In other words, they must remain faithful to the holy commandment delivered (as a tradition) to them.

Jude 3-4

3 Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort [you] that ye should earnestly contend for the faith {*pistis*} which was once delivered {*paradidomi*} unto the saints.

4 For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.

- The faith—that body of doctrine that constitutes the Christian world view—was handed over (as a tradition) to the saints by God. In response to the entrance of ungodly impostors into the church, it is imperative that true believers fight earnestly for the preservation of orthodox doctrine.

A Theology of Tradition

The Concept of Tradition

The biblical concept of tradition is broad, including references to the following:

- Religious customs (Mt 15.2; Mk 7.2-3; Acts 6.14; 1 Cor 11.2; Gal 1.13-14; 2 Thess 3.6-10)
- Spiritual truth (Rom 6.17; 2 Thess 2.15; 2 Pet 2.21; Jude 3)
- Oral history, especially pertaining to Christ's life and ministry (Lk 1.1-2; 1 Cor 11.23-25)
- Social customs and beliefs as a whole (Col 2.8; 1 Pet 1.18)
- Official pronouncements (Acts 16.4)

An Assessment of Tradition

Obviously, the word *tradition* can be used to describe a number of social phenomena—some good, some bad. Tradition is not inherently a spiritual phenomenon, but a cultural one. According to a common dictionary, *tradition* denotes “cultural continuity in social attitudes and institutions.” Given the dynamic nature of culture, it follows that, over time, traditions will not remain equally effective

at accomplishing their original intent. Hence, the preservation of a social form does not ensure continued accomplishment of primal purpose.

Traditions often emerge as pragmatic means to an end rather than as traditions per se. Over time, however, the social form becomes cemented with or without regard for its original purpose. Cultural change can then render the tradition trivial or obsolete. This process is no less true of religious traditions than of other cultural forms. Church history is replete with examples of cultural norms that were perpetuated far beyond the memory of their earliest meaning. Indeed, given the rapid rate at which cultures evolve, religious traditions can become counterproductive rather quickly.

Churches and Christians have two options: First, they can deny the relative, pragmatic nature of cultural forms and attempt to remain constant in the face of change. On the other hand, they can recognize the dynamic character of culture and attempt to adapt to it in a positive manner. It is my belief that the former leads to trivialization and loss of relevance and influence. However, the latter poses difficult challenges as well, most notably the danger of losing the uniqueness of the Christian identity in the face of excessive cultural contextualization.

So what are the bounds within which Christians may legitimately yield to culture? Actually, the Scriptures are quite clear on the issue. There are three essential principles that the Christian must observe. First, traditions should uphold the clear commands of the Word of God (Mt 15.3-6; Mk 7.9-13). Conversely, no tradition should be tolerated which hinders obedience to biblical commands. Second, traditions should exalt Christ (Col 2.8; 1 Pet 1.18-19). Accordingly, no tradition should be allowed which diminishes the Lord's person or work. Third, traditions should aid the furtherance of the gospel (Gal 1.11-14; 2 Thess 2.13-15). Again, any form which obstructs the cause of evangelism should be rejected.

In conclusion, churches are under divine obligation to make honest assessment of their practices in the light of the biblical principles described above. It is not to be expected that every church will reach the same conclusions, for each one operates in a somewhat unique cultural medium. Where churches do differ in judgment, they will answer (as in all things) to the Lord. This prescription safeguards the essentials—the Scriptures, Christ, and the gospel—while protecting the autonomy of each local assembly to make choices in non-essential areas.

Bibliography

Büchsel, Friedrich. "Paradidomi." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume*. Ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985. 167-68.

Büchsel, Friedrich. "Paradosis." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume*. Ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985. 168.

Unger, Merrill F. "Tradition." *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Revised and updated ed. Chicago: Moody, 1988. 1299.