Tradition or Expediency?

(by Paul R. Blake)

***(Editor's note: The following question was asked of me regarding the means of distinguishing between tradition and expediency. The answer to that question may provide a good study for all of us. -- -prb)***

*"There are things that the church does sometimes that seem more like tradition than law... for example: business meetings of the men. The problem is figuring out which are simply traditions and which are really based upon God's word as law and not merely a convenient twist of the Scriptures and man's philosophy. How can I tell which one is which?"*

**Good question.** Indeed there are a number of things we do that seem like tradition and could become tradition if we allow them. Business meetings are one good example.

But, I usually illustrate this point with public confession of sin by coming forward during the invitation song: ***"Is that the only way one can do it?"***. We have the expedient practice of having the erring brother come forward during the invitation song, sit down on the front row, ask the preacher to speak on his behalf to the church, and then we have a prayer. This practice was developed as an expedient way of facilitating our observance of **James 5:16**. But, it is not the only way to do it. In **Acts 19:18-19**, it appears that the disciples were meeting outside where the books of black magic could be burned, when at that gathering many confessed their sins. There was no invitation song mentioned in the text.

Coming forward during an invitation song to confess sins is expedient until the circumstances warrant a change. If we insist on doing it that way regardless of the circumstances, we make our expediency into a binding tradition. Let me illustrate this with three genuine examples:

**1)** Years ago, a man called me from work at 11:30 PM on a Monday night to tell me that his conscience was troubling him & he needed to confess his sins. He wanted to know if he had to wait until Wednesday services before he could be forgiven of his sins. At midnight after his shift, we met at the building along with two other brethren; he confessed his sins. We prayed for him. The following Wednesday evening, we announced his confession & restoration at the beginning of services. After services were over, another came to me & told me that he would *"never accept his repentance, because it wasn't made down front after the invitation song."*

**2)** A few years later, another man came forward after the Sunday morning sermon and wanted to make his confession directly to the church. He said he didn't want to be shielded from the shame by having me speak for him. His confession was appropriate, humble, and moving. We prayed for him, and the disciples rejoiced to see his restored in such courage. However, another person told me after services that evening that I was out of line for letting him speak, and not speaking for him *"like we have done it for years."*

**3)** On one occasion, a tearful sister came to me with a letter before Sunday morning services and asked me to read her confession verbatim from a letter she had written before worship began, because she wanted to worship that day in spirit and in truth. The next day I was "advised" that I had made worship "disorderly" by disrupting the established pattern, and not waiting until after the invitation song.

Most of the time, it is expedient and orderly to restore the erring after the invitation song. But when our expediency begins to interfere with revealed truth, it is no longer expedient... it becomes a tradition of men.

The danger that exists when we study this issue is to go too far in either direction. One can be tempted to crystallize expediencies into tradition as some have done. The other extreme is to do what the digressives have done and treat sound doctrine as if it were a tradition of men to be discarded as old fashioned.

The solution is obvious, but not necessarily easy. Learn how to distinguish between the following: sound doctrine *(commands, divinely approved examples, essential implications)*, matters of individual conscience, expediencies, and religious error. Only sound doctrine can be the basis for binding and loosing and establishing fellowship with God. Matters of individual conscience and expediencies, when bound upon others, become traditions of men... the moral equivalent of religious error.

***"Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying, ‘Why do Thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they wash not their hands when they eat bread.’ But He answered and said unto them, ‘Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition? “But in vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men"’”*** (**Matthew 15:1-3, 8**). ***"Hold fast the pattern of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus"*** (**2Timothy 1:13**).

The Bible

(Author Unknown)

**L**ast eve I passed beside a blacksmith’s door **A**nd heard the anvil ring the vesper chime; **W**hen looking in, I saw upon the floor **O**ld hammers worn with beating years of time. *“****H****ow many anvils have you had,”* said I, *“****T****o wear and batter all these hammers so?” “****J****ust one,”* said he; then said with twinkling eye, *“****T****he anvil wears the hammers out, you know.”* **A**nd so I thought of the anvil of God’s Word **F**or ages skeptics’ blows have beat upon; **Y**et, though the noise of falling blows was heard, **T**he anvil is unharmed – the hammers gone!