Traditions and Customs

“Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you” (1 Corinthians 11:2).

In order to draw biblical conclusions on any topic, we must understand the fundamentals of language, the meaning of words, the proper use of grammar, and the gist of the context. These are the tools by which thoughts and concepts are conveyed. Paul wrote,

For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words (1 Corinthians 2:11–13).

Two important principles contained in these verses are relevant to our study of the Christian woman. First, God has revealed His thoughts to inspired men through the Spirit so that we can “know” the mind of God. The Greek word for “know” in 1 Corinthians 2:12 is ginōsko, which means to have knowledge derived from experience or to reach a deduction based on reason. It is from the Greek eidomen, which means to see or understand. Second, God has used “words” (1 Corinthians 2:13), logos, to reveal His thoughts, or message. We cannot understand this message or know the mind of God based on human reason or deductions alone, but must depend on the meanings of “words,” the vehicles through which He has revealed Himself.

Based on the fact that God has conveyed His thoughts to us through “words,” we must understand the meaning of His “words” in order to “know” the truths He has revealed. For this reason, word studies will sometimes be necessary in our study to understand God’s will concerning His design for women.

TRADITION AND GENDER ROLES

Those who discuss the woman’s place in God’s plan frequently mention “tradition” and “traditional practices.” Often, the terms “tradition” and “traditional” are used to mean nonbinding practices which have been handed down from one generation to the next. Groups within society sometimes seek to bind these traditions on others.

From the biblical perspective, a “tradition” is neither good nor bad in itself and must be judged by more than whether or not it is considered a “tradition.” In the Bible the word “tradition” (Gk.: paradosis) contains the idea of “that which is handed down.” The first question to ask is “Who handed it down?” Did it come from God or men? The second question to ask is “Has God legislated this area?” Traditions in matters which God has not legislated are neutral so far as He is concerned. Nations, families, communities, schools, congregations of the Lord’s church, and other groups can have traditions as long as they do not set aside God’s Word.
Any *paradosis*—"tradition" or "ordinance"—which came from God, was revealed by the inspired writers of the Bible, and was practiced by the first Christians is to be practiced today (1 Corinthians 11:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6). No one should speak lightly of these traditions. However, any tradition which has been introduced by man which violates God’s commandments is not to be practiced (Matthew 15:3–9; Mark 7:6–13; Colossians 2:8).

A tradition should be evaluated using the following tests. (1) Is this tradition handed down from Jesus? If so, we are to follow it (Matthew 28:20). (2) Is this practice condemned by God? (For example, see 1 John 5:21.) If so, it must be rejected. (3) Has God stated a choice in the realm of the practice? If so, we are restricted by His choice. (See Hebrews 7:12–14.) If God’s choices were not restrictive, His Word would be meaningless. Whenever a precedent is found in the Bible, it is to be considered binding and should be respected above human traditions. (4) If God has not made any choice in a particular realm, we have the freedom to accept or reject traditions that arise in that realm. (See Romans 14:2, 3.)

**ROLES FOR MEN AND WOMEN**

Within our societies, men and women have traditional roles which may change from time to time and from place to place. On the other hand, certain roles may never change, since they are based on the physiological and emotional makeup of men and women. In many ways men and women are the same, but in other ways they are different. That is how God created them. Since He is the Creator, He alone knows the best arrangement for their roles and for their relationships with each other.

Even though men and women are different and have unique responsibilities, this does not affect God’s attitude toward their worth. They are of equal value in His eyes. God has given men and women differing roles and responsibilities in life based on their natures.

**TRADITION AND CUSTOMS**

Customs and traditions generally fall into the same categories. The terms have similar meanings: A “custom” is defined as “a practice followed by people of a particular group or region,”¹ and “tradition” is “the passing down of a culture from generation to generation, [especially] orally.”² A custom may include a practice or procedure that is preferred by a culture or society as a whole because that is the way they normally have done something. A tradition may be a practice that is respected within certain segments of society because it has been handed down from one generation to another.

The biblical view of customs falls within the following principles:

(1) Some customs are to be practiced by Christians because they are institutions bound by society. The NASB may best convey the meaning of 1 Peter 2:13, 14: “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.” A Christian is to submit to all human “institutions” (Gk.: *ktisis*; literally, “creation”). This would include laws and customs instituted by man, as long as they do not violate ordinances of God. (See Acts 5:29.)

(2) Some customs are to be practiced by Christians in accordance with the culture in which they live. Doing so will enhance their opportunities to teach the lost in that society, even though the same practices may not be beneficial in another culture. When Paul was among the Gentiles, he lived as a Gentile; when he was among the Jews, he followed Jewish customs (1 Corinthians 9:20). Whichever customs he followed, he did nothing that would violate the teachings of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:21).

Paul’s practice is vividly illustrated by his choosing to circumcise Timothy and his refusal to circumcise Titus. In order to prevent any obstacle in preaching the gospel to the Jews who knew that Timothy had a Greek father and a Jewish mother, he circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3). However, he refused to let the church circumcise Titus, who had no Jewish ancestors; the church had no right to encroach on Titus’ freedom (Galatians 2:3–5). The circumcision of Timothy afforded Paul opportunities to preach to Jews who would not have listened to him if he had been traveling with an uncircumcised companion. On the other hand, allowing Titus to be circumcised would have sent a wrong message to the church, implying that Jewish customs and laws could be bound on Gentile

---

²Ibid., s.v. “tradition.”
Christians.

(3) Christians are not to engage in customs that are forbidden by God. Even though Paul followed some of the customs of the Gentiles, he and other Christians were not allowed to follow their customs of corrupt living. Peter wrote, “For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousals, drinking parties and abominable idolatries” (1 Peter 4:3). Customs that violate God’s restrictions are forbidden for a Christian.

(4) Some customs may be neutral. What a Christian does in these areas is simply a matter of his or her personal preferences. Christians have the choice to eat or not to eat the various foods that are customarily eaten in a society: “Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him” (Romans 14:3). Christians have the right to follow a custom or not to follow a custom if the cause of Christ is not affected by his choice.

(5) Christians may establish beneficial customs, but they are not binding. Both Jesus and Paul customarily went to the synagogues to teach (Luke 4:16; Acts 17:2). This was a good custom for them to practice, but such a practice is not binding on Christians.

(6) Some societies have customs that God has commanded Christians to practice. These are bound on Christians because they are commanded by God, not because they are customs in society. The following are examples of customs in a culture that were bound on the Christian community.

a. The Jews had the custom of having elders as their leaders (Matthew 15:2; 16:21; Luke 22:66; Acts 4:5). Elders were appointed in the churches as well (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).


c. Two witnesses were needed by the Jews to settle a case (Deuteronomy 17:6; Matthew 26:60). Christians also are to have two or more witnesses to verify a fact or support an accusation (2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19).

d. Marriage was a custom for Gentiles and Jews. God expects only men and women who are married to live together (Romans 7:2, 3; 1 Corinthians 7:2, 9).

e. Jews practiced ceremonial baths and washings with water for purification purposes (Mark 7:3, 4). God requires a burial in water in order to receive the cleansing blood of Jesus (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Colossians 2:12, 13; Ephesians 5:26).

Proving that something was a custom within society does not negate it as a requirement from God. This is true of the binding nature of marriage, immersion for cleansing from sin, the husband/wife relationship, the woman’s role in the church, and any other practice commanded by God. The fact that God commanded something which was also a cultural practice or community custom would not make it less binding on Christians. Regardless of what society does or does not do, God’s commandments are binding. When Paul said, “And do not be conformed to this world, . . .’ (Romans 12:2), he meant to avoid sinful practices in society; he did not mean for us to give up doing something God has commanded because it is a cultural practice. “The Christian cannot simply dismiss a teaching because it is found to have a basis in the culture at the time.”

In dealing with the role of the woman and her responsibilities, the Bible does not appeal to culture. Rather, the appeal is to God’s planned order in creation and to God’s law:

For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman’s sake, but woman for the man’s sake (1 Corinthians 11:8, 9; see 1 Timothy 2:13).

Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says (1 Corinthians 14:34).

Customs are never the stated basis of her role.

Let us consider an example. Some people have concluded that the “holy kiss” was only a custom and is not binding. Based on this example, they have sought to dismiss other commands of God as nonbinding customs. The statements concerning the “holy kiss” (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26) and the “kiss of love” (1 Peter 5:14) regulated the way the greeting kiss was to be given; the kiss itself was not the command. Since people in that society commonly greeted each other in this way already, Paul

---

between men and women must begin with revelation. Experience, custom, and logic can stumble into truth; however, solid ground can be found only in God’s revealed Word.

We will approach this study with a careful consideration of the Scriptures related to the subject of woman. We will make an effort to avoid speculation, invalid assumptions, and preconceived conclusions. To avoid these entirely would be to step outside humanity into deity; while this not possible, all of us should seek to be as objective as possible when we approach a subject that is packed full of emotions and prejudice. The question all of us should be earnestly seeking to answer is “What does God have to say about this subject?” If we make this our goal, we should reach correct conclusions.

We should not excuse ourselves from searching for the truth on this subject because many learned and scholarly people disagree. If we let this discourage us in our study, we will never seek truth on any subject. Almost every topic we can consider will have studies by learned people with differing opinions. As we study, we should exercise love toward each other and not seek to bind our conclusions on another person’s conscience. In order to maintain unity, we may need to forfeit our rights for the sake of harmony when the actions of others do not affect our relationship with God.

CONCLUSION
If we continue in the words of Jesus, we can learn the truth (John 8:31, 32). This should be our approach in all religious matters.

The correct approach in seeking to learn God’s will for men and women is to study His (Word with an open mind. Let us make a sincere effort to understand God’s tradition and His commandments concerning women. Truth is contained in God’s Word, not in the commandments and teachings of men (Titus 1:14; see Colossians 2:22).

TRADITION AND REVELATION
Any search for God’s intended relationship between men and women must begin with revelation. Experience, custom, and logic can stumble into truth; however, solid ground can be found only in God’s revealed Word.

We will approach this study with a careful consideration of the Scriptures related to the subject of woman. We will make an effort to avoid speculation, invalid assumptions, and preconceived conclusions. To avoid these entirely would be to step outside humanity into deity; while this not possible, all of us should seek to be as objective as possible when we approach a subject that is packed full of emotions and prejudice. The question all of us should be earnestly seeking to answer is “What does God have to say about this subject?” If we make this our goal, we should reach correct conclusions.

We should not excuse ourselves from searching for the truth on this subject because many learned and scholarly people disagree. If we let this discourage us in our study, we will never seek truth on any subject. Almost every topic we can consider will have studies by learned people with differing opinions. As we study, we should exercise love toward each other and not seek to bind our conclusions on another person’s conscience. In order to maintain unity, we may need to forfeit our rights for the sake of harmony when the actions of others do not affect our relationship with God.

CONCLUSION
If we continue in the words of Jesus, we can learn the truth (John 8:31, 32). This should be our approach in all religious matters.

The correct approach in seeking to learn God’s will for men and women is to study His (Word with an open mind. Let us make a sincere effort to understand God’s tradition and His commandments concerning women. Truth is contained in God’s Word, not in the commandments and teachings of men (Titus 1:14; see Colossians 2:22).

TRADITION AND REVELATION
Any search for God’s intended relationship

©Copyright, 1997, 1998 by Truth For Today
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED