

Old Wine Bags

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by Wayne Murphey on Oct. 2, 2005.

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If in a worship service, after singing one song, someone would say, “I feel inspired to pray. Could we pray now?” I would gladly pray. Even though it is typical to sing several songs and have prayer requests before praying, such structure is only a form for worship. If that form were to become an entrenched tradition, think of what could happen.

Someone might say, “That was out of order. We never do it that way.” Another might add, “It was the worst prayer I ever heard.” And perhaps yet another would declare, “If this continues, I’m not going back to that church.” The worst case scenario is that deviating from tradition could break up a congregation. Just such things do happen.

Listen to what Jesus said in Luke 5:36-38: “And he spake also a parable unto them; No man putteth a piece of a new garment upon an old; if otherwise, then both the new maketh a rent, and the piece that was taken out of the new agreeth not with the old. And no man putteth new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish. But new wine must be put into new bottles; and both are preserved.”

Wineskins are a form, or a shape, to hold wine. A wineskin had to be pliable, because as the wine which was put into it fermented, the skin would expand. Old wineskins become rigid and burst from the pressure of fermenting wine. Jesus was making reference to the old Law, which was too rigid to allow for the workings of the new dispensation of the Holy Spirit.

In today’s worship, church services are a form to give the Holy Spirit a place to work. Church traditions can be good or bad. They are bad if they restrict and compress the Holy Spirit, but good if they provide Him a place to work.

Religious traditions usually develop around the application of a spiritual principle. Because an application works in a particular given time and setting, a tradition tends to develop in regard to it.

Chuck Swindoll tells of a young man who asked his wife why she always cut off both ends of a ham before cooking. Puzzled, she replied, “I don’t know; that’s the way my mother did it.” The next time they visited her mother, the young man inquired why she always removed the ends of the ham. Her response was similar to that of her daughter—there was no good reason; she had simply seen her mother do it. Later, at a family reunion, the young man pressed the grandmother for the real answer. She responded, “Oh, when my daughter was growing up, I never owned a pan that was large enough to put a whole ham in without cutting off both ends.”

Traditions can be meaningful and bring stability in a particular setting, but as time passes and they are rigidly adhered to, they can become a set of shackles which steal away spiritual freedom.

The last thing the Apostle Peter heard Christ say was to go into all the world and make disciples. Yet Peter faced a crisis at Joppa. God had to break through one of Peter’s traditions so the Holy Spirit could work in making disciples. Even after God, in a vision, told Peter three times not to call unclean what He had cleansed, Peter still wanted to say, “Lord, no.” Peter had a reason for not eating unclean animals. For a particular time and reason, God instructed the Israelites not to consume unclean animals. But God was ready to take the church into a new era, one in which the Holy Spirit could work in the hearts of people of all nations.

Peter went to Ceasarea, but he still seemed to entertain a mindset of reluctance about the whole thing. “And he said unto them, Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean.” Acts 10:28. This would be about like a man telling his wife, “You’re not very pretty, but I love you because God told me to.”

Notice Cornelius' response. "And Cornelius said, Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and, behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, And said, Cornelius, thy prayer is heard, and thine alms are had in remembrance in the sight of God. Send therefore to Joppa, and call hither Simon, whose surname is Peter; he is lodged in the house of one Simon a tanner by the sea side: who, when he cometh, shall speak unto thee." Acts 10:30-32.

This story must have inspired Peter, for consider his reply: "Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him." Acts 10:34, 35. Peter continued with a Holy Ghost inspired message.

What was the result of Peter breaking a tradition and preaching this inspired message? "While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost." Acts 10:44, 45.

Tradition creates a mindset which sometimes can develop into rigidity. It is not wrong to question a practice, even when it works well in many ways. It may even be one worth continuing, yet there may not be biblical authority for it. For example, when we pray, we generally bow our heads and close our eyes. But there is no biblical authority for this. It is fine to do so, and some consider it an act of respect, but neither this nor any other tradition should become a sacred cow. If others should come into our midst and pray with eyes open and faces uplifted, it is not for us to judge. Such differences are not something we should evaluate by tradition, but by the witness of the Holy Spirit.

Again, worship services create a form, a structure, just like a wine bag does for wine, in which the Holy Spirit can work. But if the structure becomes a tradition that does not allow for flexibility, it may not accommodate what God wants to do for or through us. God is the God of creativity, and I am convinced there are times when He wants to do something special and different. Let us keep our hearts and minds open to His Spirit and enjoy the way in which He chooses to work. Amen.