

Tradition Hinders Spiritual Growth

– Series Introduction –

Today, there's a lot of talk among Christians about getting back to how the New Testament Church functioned. From my standpoint, I've come to believe *Tradition makes this wish impossible*. When I retired five years ago, I couldn't have imagined writing about the stifling effects of tradition. Then, unexpectedly, the seeds of this project sprouted from repetitive exposure to the Letters of Paul. This forty-five year study has shaped my conception of what the Church, the Body of Christ is; how it's to function; God's purpose for its members; and how His purpose touches every detail of Christian practice. Having undergone this theological evolution, when I compare my current views of how the Body is presented in Scripture with what's happening in present day Christendom, I am troubled.

For, I see obstacles in churches and organizations often brought on by separating doctrine from teachings of lifestyle change. This dichotomy exists even though both topics are clearly linked in most contexts. Also, I observe problems caused by the practice of compromise. This is because a number of Bible teachers aren't willing to share everything they know. Based on these two widespread practices, the cumulative effect of multi-century-sustained error continues to rear its ugly head, come full circle, and manifest its toxicity through dysfunction and division in the Body.

Having said this, I recognize I'm simply one teacher amidst millions of others. Each of us possesses a Spirit-given gift to benefit the Church and, ultimately, the Lord will evaluate how well we perform our job. So, I suppose, even though this series is intended to edify all Christians, it's more about the responsibility teachers in the Body bear than anything else. This is because we've been designated to help all believers develop so everyone together can contribute to growth in the Church (Eph. 4:11-16).

Before proceeding, I want to share a ritual my wife and I have most mornings as we begin our day. We enjoy coffee during which I often share my thoughts about Scripture so I can get her 'take' on it. I value Debi's opinion because she has an analytical mind, has spent a great deal of time studying the Word, endeavors to respond in a productive manner, is a skilled communicator, and always targets the underlying intent. So, I know I'll receive 'constructive criticism'. Sometimes, she asks me to clarify what I mean. Other times she questions if my ideas are too provocative because she wants to protect my ministry. Often, she probes into how I plan to share my point of view to help me communicate it in the most effective manner. At times, she actually says something like 'Do you know how

arrogant that sounds?’ Yes, our relationship is very real. Nevertheless, in her Christian-sister-role, she serves as my devil’s advocate and has been the greatest influence in keeping me on the straight-and-narrow. Although this task hasn’t always been easy for her, I do appreciate how seriously she takes this important 24/7 spousal duty.

In addition to my wife, I also thank the Lord for the half dozen believers whom I’ve always had as a core group to hold me accountable. Each time one departs to be with the Lord, there seems to be another to take their place. In a variety of unique relationships, I’ve always had at least a couple individuals with whom I can pretty much share anything concerning the Christian life. Frequently, I’ll throw out an idea about a biblical issue I’ve been pondering and say, ‘What do you think?’ Other times I’ll ask, ‘Am I crazy for coming to this conclusion?’ Sometimes, they say I am! As good friends, they offer their honest assessment. Bouncing things off of brothers and sisters as listening-posts has offered me verification, correction and/or modification of hundreds of concepts over the years. I genuinely believe interactions like these represent part of how God intends for us to develop while we mutually minister to one another.

As this series unfolds, if you think some of my conclusions are peculiar, just know most of my beliefs are based on what I’ve learned from other teachers. A majority of Bible teachers see a lot of truth in the Word but don’t always apply what they know to the everyday operation of the Church. Usually, this is because many truths are unpopular. Over the years, I’ve seen this common routine of separating principles of doctrine and practice result in a large amount of misinformation, imbalance, ineffectiveness, and disunity in the one Body. Sometimes these negative outcomes arise from sincere inexperience with what the Word teaches, but most often compromise is the culprit. The former cause is inexcusable as competent teachers should know what they’re talking about. Compromise, as I’ve seen from the inside, is practiced for the purpose of retaining numbers, obtaining the reverence of men, maintaining personal salaries and contributions, and carrying out what’s cleverly termed as ‘ministry’ for the sake of the “gospel”.

The part of the “gospel” which pertains to Christian growth never includes compromising truth (Acts 20:20, 27; Gal. 4:16; Eph. 4:15; 2 Tim. 4:1-3). Based on how I understand Scripture, a simple outline representing our ministry includes bold yet gracious dissemination of truth, tolerance among believers so growth can occur, loving interactions rooted in godly character, and the need for periodic doctrinal/moral stands to protect the flock. However, when compromises are made and persist, the Church suffers. Thank God I’ve had the privilege of knowing a few mentors who’ve tried their best not to compromise what they

know. By saints like these, the Body of Christ enjoys a living perspective into the potential for transformation of both mind and heart (Gal. 5:16-24; Eph. 3:18-21; 5:16-21; Phil. 3:17). When maturity emanates from a fellow believer, young and old benefit as we witness a True-Mentor-in-Action.

As you've probably gathered by now, I plan to write this series by using some different techniques than in past articles. I've chosen to deliver it in the first person so my feelings and experiences can be included. Similarly, I'll seek to connect truths from the Word with the emotions that should accompany conviction. Also, this commentary will typically be composed of down-to-earth language with the goal of including a wider audience. Finally, my conclusions are based on linking biblical instruction with real-life circumstances which I've either personally experienced or seen others go through. So, I can truly affirm, 'Been there, done that'. In the end, my desire is to appeal to each reader's conscience so you're left to contemplate your own life-choices by the principle, 'If the shoe fits, wear it'.

Please know, it's not my intent to target any particular individual or group. However, experience has taught me it's virtually impossible to achieve meaningful reform in any assembly which emphasizes some teachings given for the Body instead of granting equal importance to the full spectrum of truth. In contrast with groups, I believe *infinite reform is possible in every believer* who submits to renewal by the Spirit's power to internalize this life-changing instruction (Rom. 12:2). As individuals take responsibility to mature, they become models inspiring spiritual development in others. This *domino effect* is how God designed the Church to be *perfected, built up, and caused to grow* (Rom. 12:1-21; Eph. 4:11-16).

Note, this renewal process was formulated by God to reach its full potential when the entire Body is involved. For this reason, *the optimum level of reformation can't take place in separated groupings of believers*. So, it's my sincere hope these articles will help motivate each believer to take the steps needed to facilitate growth in the Universal Church.

Recently, a senior example of mine, Bob Renberg, encouraged me to adopt a life-verse from Scripture. He shared his is Galatians 2:20 and recited it something like this: "I've been crucified with Christ, nevertheless I don't live but Christ lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith (or "faithfulness") of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." This recommendation prompted me to think about verses which could represent this series. Immediately, Acts 20:20 came to mind where Paul addresses the Ephesian

Elders about his past service among them saying, “Publically and house to house, I didn’t shrink back from announcing to you and teaching you the things which are profitable.” Then, a few verses later he adds, “For I didn’t shrink back from announcing to you *all the counsel of God*” (v. 27 – emphasis mine).

That is my goal for this series. I don’t want to simply beat around the bush by targeting passages which support my beliefs. But, my aim is to boldly tackle all pertinent Scripture which contributes to grasping God’s purpose for the Church and how we should engage in it. I don’t claim to know everything or expect you to believe every aspect of what I teach. Nor should you take my teaching for granted or build your faith on it. For that matter, you shouldn’t blindly accept what anyone else teaches either. Quite the opposite! For, all Christians should be like the noble Bereans who searched the Scriptures to see if what they heard Paul teach was actually true (Acts. 17:11).

As a teacher in the Body, my job is to educate believers for the purpose of helping them understand the intended meaning of the Word along with its ramifications (2 Tim. 2:2; Heb. 10:25). Then, God holds each member responsible to check out the Word and come to their own conclusions. When a believer takes this course, he or she will effectively construct the foundation they need to support a self-assured Christian life (Rom. 14:22-23; Col. 3:16-17; 1 Tim. 4:6-16; 2 Tim. 4:1-3).

While stressing personal accountability, I want you to know I respect the autonomy of fellow Body members. For, every teacher should defer to the fact Christians will individually give an account to our Lord for the choices we make during this life. And, teachers should offer a *prime example of this reality* by executing our job with sober anticipation of that Judgment Day (Rom. 14:10-12, 22-23; 1 Cor. 3:12-17; 2 Cor. 5:9-11; Heb. 13:17).

In keeping with this outlook, my objective is to share the Word in a way which supports the spiritual independence of every single believer, though I haven’t always taken this approach. For, in my younger years I was influenced by assertions such as, ‘After you study (whatever topic) you’ll end up coming to my position.’ Since then, the Word has compelled me to abandon tactics like this, which I now realize discourage responsibility but encourage indoctrination and pride.

At this time, I’d like to share a memory which throws light on my primary reason for writing about Scripture. About ten years ago, Debi and I visited one of my mentors who was 88 at the time. Gordon McNeilly, a medical doctor, along with

his gracious wife, Lois, entertained us for about an hour in their home. I can't describe the testimony this couple had throughout their life by quietly demonstrating the fruits of the Spirit in a way I've never been graced to see before nor since. To this day, just pondering the impact they had on me along with so many others makes me smile. During this final visit, Doc asked me what I wanted to do when I retired. After sharing one of my goals was to write biblically based material, I distinctly remember and have taken to heart a recommendation he made. He encouraged me not to just replicate what's already out there but to write about new things, at least to the extent a theme is dealt with in a fresh way.

Planned articles for this series have this purpose in mind. All subjects will relate to how *Tradition Hinders Spiritual Growth* including: An essay on 'God's Single Movement' – the Body of Christ; How the Holy Spirit leads believers in this dispensation; Consideration of Church leaders and their responsibilities; Present day significance of the Judgment Seat of Christ; How salvation by Election impacts everyday life; A practical discussion of Greek Editions and Translations; The reality all believers are 'Called to the Ministry'; Paul's teaching on financial support for leaders and believers; and 'Bible study' described by the Epistles. As the series proceeds, a few more articles will probably be added. Though this exposition will test the beliefs of some and parts may even be considered controversial, I thank my friends for urging me to write about these topics. For, they assure me a renewed deliberation of these issues will benefit Christians, especially since the intention is to source Scripture alone and *exclude every tradition introduced by so-called 'Church History'*.

As already stated, the secondary goal of this series is to challenge Bible teachers, including myself, to **do our job and teach all of the truth God intended for the Church!** May each of us in our God-given role conduct our service to the Body with **"fear and trembling"** while realizing one day we'll answer for the job we do (1 Cor. 2:1-5; 3:10-17; 4:1-5; 2 Cor. 5:9-11; Phil. 2:12-18; Heb. 13:17). Without further introduction, if this overview has sparked your interest, join me in evaluating why various *Traditions Deter Spiritual Growth*.

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New Testament quotes are original translations by the author from the Greek texts.