

Platforms for Expressing People's Traditions

Text

1 Cor. 11:1-2 (KJV) *¹ Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ. ² Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.*

1 Cor. 11:23 *For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread...*

Memory Verse

1 Cor. 11:2 (KJV) *Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.*

Introduction

Every culture has “platforms” - ways in which people show who they are. Think dress codes, greetings, the format for weddings and funerals, language, holidays. These things make a group recognizable.

Both the Old Covenant with Moses and the New Covenant with Jesus had to deal with these cultural platforms. The question is: which cultural

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practices get to stay, which get changed, and which get dropped when someone becomes a follower of Jesus?

The basic test is, “does it contradict God?” If the answer is “no”, we are in the territory of Rom. 14:5 (“let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind”), but if the answer is “yes”, we are in Mark 7:9 territory (“full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition”).

“Tradition” vs “Ordinance”

In our lead text, 1 Cor. 11:1-2, the Greek word ‘paradosis’, is translated as “ordinance” in the KJV, but as “tradition” in many other Bible translations, such as the NKJV and NIV.

The word ‘Paradosis’ (Strong’s Concordance G3860) describes “the act of delivering someone or something over from one party to another”.

The choice of word used to translate it can ‘fuzz’ our understanding. Many of us think of an “ordinance” as coming from God, and a “tradition” from man. To clarify our understanding, we need to look at the source of what is being “delivered over”.

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1 Cor. 11:1 tells us that Paul is following Christ, and 1 Cor. 11:23 tells us clearly: “I have received of the Lord that which I delivered unto you”.

Thus 1 Cor. 11:2 is talking about instructions passed on from the Lord through Paul.

“Ordinance” is arguably the safer translation. Paul did not invent his teachings, he received them from the Lord, and we should not ignore them.

Objective

To see how things such as head coverings, leadership roles, worship style, marriage, burial, language, and holidays can express culture, but, in some cases, following culture may lead us to contravene the command of the Lord. We must learn not to confuse culture with the Gospel, and not to allow culture to override the ordinances of the Lord.

Presentation

1. Dress Codes Are Cultural, but Can Conflict with the Lord’s Commands

Example: Corinth

We have seen above that in 1 Cor. 11 Paul is talking about commands from the Lord. In verse 2

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of the chapter, Paul is praising the assembly in Corinth for keeping the ordinances given to them. However, verse 3 starts with a 'But'. Paul is about to temper the praise of verse 2 with a 'black mark', highlighting some way in which the assembly is falling short. The subject is that of head covered or uncovered whilst praying:

1 Cor. 11:2-6 ²*Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you.* ³*But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.* ⁴*Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonours his head.* ⁵*But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved.* ⁶*For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered.*

In these verses Paul first lays out the foundation for his criticism, the foundation being God's order, which is summarised as follows:

Christ > man > woman, all under God.

Note that this 'creation order' is from Genesis 2, not from Corinth custom. Both the man and the woman are to be in submission within their

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appointed roles to the one from whom they originate – woman to man, man to Christ.

Paul's criticism in the light of God's order is that a man who covers his head when praying or prophesying dishonours Christ. A woman praying or prophesying with head uncovered dishonours man, her head.

Paul's correction for this 'malpractice' in worship is as follows:

(1) The man is given two prohibitions: firstly he must not cover his head while praying or prophesying, and secondly, from verse 14, he must not wear the glory of the woman – long hair.

(2) For women, both verse 6 and later verse 13 show that women should pray and prophesy with a head covering.

Verse 6 essentially says to women in worship "cover your head or shave it / cut off your hair", but "if it is shameful to shave it or cut it off, then cover it".

There is no middle road – cover it, or walk as a shameful woman with shaved head. If you do not want to cover it, go all the way and shave it and

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show yourself openly to be the shameful woman that you are by refusing to cover it.

Note that Paul says nature shows us that long hair is a glory for women, but a shame for men (1 Cor. 11:14-15), and the implication of verse 6 is that the reverse for women must also be true – a shaved head is shameful. So if you want to rebel and not cover your head in worship, go ahead but go all the way and shave your head so that there is no doubt that you are in rebellion.

In case we are still in any doubt about whether women should cover their head in a public assembly, verse 13 says:

1 Cor. 11:13 *Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?*

Is “hair” or “long hair” sufficient covering?

Since Paul says that the woman’s hair is given her for a covering (1 Cor. 11:15), the question then must be asked – is “hair” sufficient for the woman to be covered?

We know that whatever covering is sufficient for the woman must not be worn by the man. So if “hair” is sufficient for the woman, then “no hair” must be worn by the man. But no-one would

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argue that Paul was instructing men to make themselves bald to pray. So “hair” alone is not sufficient for the woman, at least without some styling qualification.

If “long hair” is sufficient for the woman, but “short hair” is rebellion, then that would be consistent, in so far as men could comply with “short hair” and no other head covering.

But if we accept “long hair” as the covering for women in public worship, then, aside from the fact that we get into arguments of what constitutes “short” and “long”, we still come up against verse 10: “for this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels.”

The Greek word ‘exousia’ in this verse, translated as “power” or “authority”, implies a sign, token, or badge of authority. Specifically, the verse is saying that the woman ought to wear a sign symbolizing that she is under the protection and authority of her husband. Long hair alone does not suffice for this.

In pretty much every culture, a head covering (over and above “hair”) symbolizes submission and respect. Thus Paul is commanding that in

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public worship women should wear this visible sign.

Finally, remember that in 1 Cor. 11, Paul is not just addressing the assembly in Corinth, he is addressing all assemblies, the whole Church, because he is delivering the ordinances of the Lord. Therefore the head covering rule still applies to us today. Thus whilst our culture may have made head coverings for women 'optional' long ago, as Christians in the assembly we should not do so.

2. Leadership and Worship Patterns Are Commanded by the Lord

In his writings, Paul clearly sets out a blueprint for the organisation of the Church, with men as bishops (1 Tim. 3:1-7), and deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-15). He also sets out a divine subjection of women to men in order (1. Tim 2:12, 1 Cor. 14:34), whilst having equality in worth (Gal. 3:28).

The role of women vs men in the assembly differs, in accordance with God's order set out above (Christ > man > woman, all under God). The different roles are discussed more fully in Chapter 24.

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The Jews added man-made rules - hand washing, food rules (Mark 7:4). Jesus rejected those (Mark 7:8-9). They bind no one.

But 1 Cor. 11:2-16 is not about tradition. Paul calls it 'ordinances delivered' (1 Cor. 11:2) and 'commandments of the Lord' (1 Cor. 14:37). That binds all churches (2 Cor. 11:16).

Do not put Christ's command in the same box as Pharisee tradition.

3. Marriage And Burial Rites Are Cultural Platforms

Marriage

Hebrew marriage customs were enough for God to honour a marriage. Jesus attended a wedding in Cana and did not change their tradition (John 2:1-10).

Your traditional marriage rites are valid before God if they are done honourably (Heb. 13:4). God unites the couple spiritually through sex after the community witnesses the rites (1 Cor. 6:16). You do not need to import Hebrew or Western customs. Parents, guardians, and church leaders should support, advise, and pray for the couple.

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Burial

Jesus's burial was simple - no mummification, no parade, no wasting money (John 19:38-42).

The problem comes when burial becomes idolatry: ringing bells to honour the dead's spirit, throwing caskets around as though the dead are watching, pouring drinks for the dead, leading people to fellowship with the dead instead of God. That is idolatry (Deut.18:10-12).

Keep it simple. Honour the person, but worship only God.

4. Language and Ceremonial Days Are Cultural Platforms Too

Ceremonial days

Many communities have days for farming, harvesting, festivals. If those days are people-centred and beneficial, there is no problem. The Jewish Christians kept observing Sabbaths and festivals for years after Jesus rose, and God did not condemn them (Col. 2:16-17, Acts 21:20-25).

Language

Greek unified the Roman world. Aramaic connected Paul to the Jewish crowd (Acts 22:2). Language unites people for a goal without friction

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(Gen. 11:5-7). Use the language people understand to communicate the gospel.

Conclusion

Whatever brings people together and gets repeated becomes tradition and custom. The key is to check: does this practice honour God, serve people, and avoid idolatry? If yes, keep it. If no, change it. If it is neutral, let each group decide for themselves (Rom. 14:5).

Evaluation Questions & Answers

1. Mention any two features of people's tradition as a mark of their identity.
 - * Hairstyle and dress codes.
 - * Burial rites – the way in which a community handles funerals can show what they believe about death and the afterlife.
2. If the Christian Faith is a tradition, what differentiates it from other traditions?
 - * The Christian tradition is rooted in Christ and the Spirit of love. Other traditions are often cultural, neutral, or tied to idolatry. The gospel is need-oriented - it changes form to meet real human needs and point people to Jesus.

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It is not locked to one culture, but it transforms every culture into which it enters. Some commands of the Lord may be in conflict with the local culture, and must take precedence over it.

3. If any tradition honours the spirit of the dead or any invisible being other than God, Christ and the Holy Spirit, it is idolatry. Discuss.
 - * This is true. Practices such as pouring drinks for the dead, ringing bells to call their spirit, or dancing with caskets because “the dead are happy” treat dead people as though they are still active spiritual beings. Scripture says that the dead do not know anything (Eccl. 9:5) and forbids communicating with them (Deut. 18:11).
 - * Honouring, serving, or seeking help from anyone except God through Christ is idolatry. We honour the person’s memory, but we worship only God.

Prayer

Father, thank You for this lesson. Guard our hearts from malice and division over cultural practices. Let the golden rule - “do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12) - guide every decision we make. In Jesus’s name, Amen.