

TRADITION OR NO TRADITION?

It seems every year when holidays come around, there's this cloud of controversy as to whether today's believers today **should** celebrate them or not. In this short article, I hope to provide you with a real standard to help you discern between something that should be celebrated and something that shouldn't.

To determine the answer, I always use the law of extrapolation. It has aided me over the years in seeing the forest for the trees and says that if something is true it should still be true at the furthest extremes. So let's establish a few rules first:

1. We are **NOT** allowed to worship the one true God in a way that is forbidden (Deut. 12:30-31).
2. We are **NOT** allowed to worship Him in any way that replaces an already clear mandate (Ex. 32).
3. We **ARE** allowed to create traditions to worship Him that do not break the first two rules.
4. We **ARE** allowed to observe traditions that don't break the written Word or the spiritual principle (the original intent) behind it.

Let's break each of these four rules down one by one.



Rule # 1

We are NOT allowed to worship the one true God in a way that is forbidden.

Deuteronomy chapter 12 is all about what to do when His people enter the Promised Land and are tempted to use some of the pagan practices they come in contact with in worshipping Yahweh. In verse 3, Yahweh specifically tells them to "destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire..." and continues into verse 4 by saying, "You shall not worship the LORD your God with such things." He furthers His thoughts through the chapter by explaining how important it is to only worship Him in the specific ways He's prescribed and to not incorporate the pagans' ideas into the ways they worship Him. He was strict for a reason. He did not want the people to do whatever was right in their own eyes (verse 8). They simply did not have enough experience with His character, no written instructions to go by at this point, and no guidance from the Holy Spirit to know if what they chose to do would be actually be offensive to Him. When you court someone for the first time, you have no idea what they like or don't like and could offend them unintentionally. For this reason, He forbade His people from being creative as this made the relationship about them instead of about Him.

Bottom line of Rule #1? We are not allowed to incorporate practices that used to be used in the worship of other gods and use them to worship Yahweh. This does not mean that if a pagan culture used a seven- or nine-branched candlestick in their practice that somehow no one for the rest of time could do the same. They didn't have electricity back then, so it would be easy to find a cult using every kind of candlestick in their pagan practices. They also used bowls, cups, and pitchers, and wore clothes! Those were very common items that cannot be made forever pagan.

So where do you draw the line? Well, let's apply this rule to, let's say, the Christmas tree. If it could be proven that the ancients took the evergreen tree, chopped it down, and brought it into their homes on the winter solstice of December 25th and decorated it in honor of the sun god's birthday, that would be completely different than lighting candles. Why? Because it is not common to bring a tree into one's house and decorate it in a form of worship connected to a religious holiday. That practice would fall directly under the Deuteronomy passage of taking a very specific and creative way of worshipping another god and applying it to the worship of Yahweh. Remember, in Deuteronomy 12, Yahweh's original intent is to train His people to use His prescribed methods of worship, not to teach them that everything a pagan ever touches somehow becomes pagan, as if they had the power to change something that was common into something forbidden. The instructions were against the practices and formulas of those pagans, not against the items themselves. For example, they both used altars. He just wanted His altar to be built a certain way. They were not allowed to keep the item, "Christianize" it, and change the meaning.

Because I know that this first rule is so *controversial* and can be difficult to learn to apply, I will further my point by directing you to Paul's words on the topic in 1 Corinthians chapter 8. Paul is dealing with the problem in the church that some believers were having a hard time eating meat from the marketplace because they didn't know if it had been offered to an idol or not. So they chose to be vegetarians. He calls these people "*weak-minded.*" In verse 4 he says that "***we know that an idol is nothing in the world and that there is no other God but one.***" In verse 7 he goes

on to say, "However, there is not in everyone that knowledge. For some, with the consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. But food does not commend us to God. For neither, if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse."

Paul makes it abundantly clear that an idol is nothing and therefore cannot make what Yahweh said clean and unclean. On the other hand, he gives an example of when eating that same meat is a sin and, therefore, forbidden. It's found in verse 10: "For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?" What is Paul saying here? He's saying that it's one thing to purchase a lamb at the market that was offered to an idol and take it home and eat it with your family. But it's a whole other thing to sit down in the temple and eat it. This is doing exactly what the pagans do for their gods and could easily cause weaker brethren to do the same thing, believing that it's okay to practice pagan traditions which might lead them back into idolatry. This, in turn, would cause them to "perish." Paul's point is that it is better to refrain from meat altogether rather than cause a brother to stumble. But the idol doesn't make an approved item unclean.

We can apply this principle today. We cannot take items that were created for the sole purpose of worshipping a foreign god and use them to worship Yahweh. For example, we know that December 25th was the birthday of the sun god of Rome. (It is documented on the Roman calendar in 354 A.D as such.) Therefore, it would be forbidden to use that date in the worship of the true God because it would be mixing the profane with the holy. Why? Because it not only breaks rule #1, but also breaks #2 (replacing existing holidays that were commanded by Him for His people (i.e. the Feast of Tabernacles)).

Another example would be the nine-branched candlesticks of Hanukkah. Some say the origin of the holiday is pagan because there's evidence that ancient pagan cults used nine-branched candlesticks. This is like saying that if a pagan cult used a three-pronged fork to eat their sacrificial offering we can no longer use three-pronged forks. There were thousands of cults in the ancient world and you can find them using all kinds of candlesticks. The nine-branched candlestick was chosen because, in Hebrew culture, the holiday was an eight-day holiday, which required an eight-candle candlestick, plus it needed the servant candle to light them, making nine total. It's the same with the seven-branched menorah in the temple. It is patterned after the six-day work week and one servant day that was Yahweh's (Sabbath)...seven total. Six days were man's week and the seventh was His. It was "holy," set apart from the six-day week.

Although we could give example after example, the important point to remember is that if we know for sure that something was used in the worship of an idol, the item itself doesn't necessarily become unclean; the way it was used is what makes it forbidden. The evergreen tree was created by Yahweh and cannot be made unclean. But if it is used in a way that is identical to how pagans used it in the worship of their gods, it's forbidden. And the simple reason why is actually found in Deuteronomy 12:31 when God says, "You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way. For every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods. For they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods." When we use items

IN THE SAME WAY as the pagans it reminds Yahweh of all the terrible things they did unto their gods.

Rule # 2

We are not allowed to worship Him in any way that replaces a clear mandate.

When Moses was up on the mountain, the children of Israel were told to stay at the bottom and wait for him to come back down with the terms of the covenant. But he was gone so long that they thought he must have died. Moses was the liaison between the people and Yahweh. In their culture, they knew they couldn't interact directly with the gods. They had to go through a mediator, an "idol." This is why they created the golden calf of Exodus 32. From their perspective, they simply thought they were replacing Moses and still worshiping Yahweh. Aaron makes this clear in Exodus 32:5 when he says, "Tomorrow is a feast to Yahweh." From Yahweh's perspective, they were in idolatry because it was a forbidden form of worship. The cow itself was not forbidden, but the way they were using it was exactly like the pagans and it was, therefore, forbidden. This method of worship replaced Yahweh's clear instructions and was not allowed.

In another example, Yahweh clearly tells His people to celebrate Passover as the prescribed holiday of the death of the Passover Lamb. In 1 Corinthians 5:8 Paul himself says, "Therefore let us keep the feast (of Passover)" (parenthetical insert mine). Unfortunately, in 325 A.D., the Catholic Church changed the celebration of Passover (celebrated on the 14th of Nisan according to scripture) for the Roman Easter (kept on the first Sunday after the spring equinox). This is forbidden since it breaks rule #2.

Rule # 3

We ARE allowed to create traditions to worship Him that do not break the first two rules.

As long as the tradition is not forbidden by its being a replication of a practice used in paganism and as long as it doesn't replace a currently-mandated tradition in scripture, it's welcome. For instance, nowhere are we commanded to worship Him on the first day of the week (our Sunday), yet the early disciples chose to do so out of convenience (Acts 20:7). They did not replace the Sabbath service, but simply continued to meet on Saturday nights and went well into the first day of the week. You can choose to have a worship service every day of the week if you want! The only commanded call to worship was on the Sabbath. The pagans worshipped the sun god on the first day of the week (Sun's Day) and had their services on that day. Does this mean that anyone that worships on Sunday is following a pagan practice? Heavens no! Sunday is not pagan. If we do not honor the seventh day of the week (the Sabbath) but choose to honor a different day of the week that is not commanded instead, **that** would be forbidden.

Another good example is Moses choosing the leadership model for all of Israel back in Exodus 18. Nowhere does Yahweh tell him exactly how to structure leadership to lead all the people. But He uses Jethro, his father-in-law, to give the advice to put leaders over tens, fifties, hundreds, and thousands so as to relieve Moses of having to do all the judging himself. This structure was

used all the way up to the time of Christ and was used in every synagogue and the early church. But you will not find it as an instruction from Yahweh Himself. This leadership style was a man-made tradition that was endorsed by God because it did not violate His Word, did not replace a clear instruction and was in line with His character, principles and original intent. It's exactly how He leads. He is the Father. He delegates authority to His Son, who then delegates authority to the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers who are to equip the body for every good work. We see the same hierarchy even within the angels of differing ranks.

Rule #4

We ARE allowed to observe traditions that don't break the written Word or the spiritual principle (the original intent) behind it.

I kind of mentioned this in the example above when I discussed the Moses model of leadership. Rules 3 and 4 are tied together. For instance, we see Yeshua Himself changing the entire meaning of the Passover when He says, "Do this in remembrance of Me." For 1200 years the Israelites "did Passover" in remembrance of having left Egypt. Now He wanted them to shift the focus to Him is the purpose of the Passover meal. He was teaching them the real meaning of "leaving Egypt" spiritually. This new tradition was not found in scripture, but it was lock step in line with the spiritual principle and original intent of the scriptures that dealt with the exodus.

There are many traditions the Jews had that Yeshua was not against. They had seven people read from the Torah portion each week in the synagogue, which was a tradition. They had many traditions in how they celebrated each holiday due to the fact that Yahweh was unclear about exactly what they should do. For instance, He gives almost no instructions on what to do on the Feast of Trumpets. So they created traditions around it. And they also celebrated Hanukkah along with many other traditions.

The Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah) had been celebrated for over 150 years before Christ in commemoration of the temple being liberated from the Greeks. In John 10:22 the text says that Yeshua attended it with no mention of condemnation. It was a national holiday celebrating the light that was restored in the temple. What was there to condemn? It did not replace a commanded holiday, nor was it forbidden, nor did it break any kind of scripture or spiritual principle. On the contrary, it fell right in line with the heart of Yahweh who Himself celebrated the light of the temple as He commanded us to place it inside ourselves and replicate it all over the world. The Feast of Dedication promoted the very act of *not* compromising the Word and making sure God's people followed Him with all their hearts.

There are many other examples that could be given, but I will only give one more: the festival of Purim. Purim was commanded to be celebrated in the book of Esther on the 14th and the 15th day of Adar in remembrance of the Jews being saved from their enemies. It honors the act of one brave woman – Esther – who chose to risk her life for the sake of her people. This is the same exact scenario as Moses commanding the leadership model or his commandments on divorce, none of which were commanded by Yahweh, but all of which were endorsed. Why? They did not break any of the above rules. They supported the written Word in both text and spirit. Yahweh was constantly telling His people not to forget His ways and to have faith in His salvation. Over

and over again He told them to "wait" on Him, to pray, fast, and be patient with the salvation of their God. This commemoration by Mordecai was an annual reminder of those exact things. When the going gets tough, the tough get on their knees.

In conclusion, it is not the traditions themselves that are bad; it's the way they're celebrated that we have to watch out for. Sometimes, very good and endorsed traditions can be polluted by people who turn them into drunken festivals and carnal parties. For instance, modern Judaism has turned Purim into a secular, Halloween-type costume party where everyone gets to be someone they're not, and Hanukkah has turned into a substitution for Christmas. In their purity, both holidays are beautiful traditions with the rich symbolism of the power of God and the faith of His people. But just like Passover in the first century, where the Jews were getting drunk on wine, Paul didn't rebuke the *holiday* in 1 Thes. 5:8, he rebuked the behavior that was *tainting* the holiday.

The same discussion goes for celebrating anniversaries, birthdays, and so on. Do they replace a biblical holiday? Does any method replicate the exact method of a pagan practice? Does it violate the written or spirit of the Word? If not, then move forward with confidence! Yahweh is not sitting up in heaven waiting to strike down the first person that makes a mistake in how they worship Him. He's a very forgiving God and loves the fact that we use the creative gifts He gave us. He just wants us to promote the things that *He* promotes and not the things that lead people away from Him or His Word.

Lastly, I want to encourage the entire body of Messiah that it is perfectly fine if you disagree with what I've just said. Everyone has the right to be wrong, including me. What we *don't* have the right to do is judge, condemn, or play God in someone else's life. We are to "always *be* ready to *give* a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15). The key there is "meekness and fear," or respect. The key characteristic of a Pharisee and without the heart of the Creator is when they try to share what they believe but do so in a way that has only one agenda: to maintain their position of superiority. Their heart is not to gently put new information on someone's plate and respectfully encourage them to take it to the Lord and do their own research. The person steeped in the pride of their own position cares more about being right and being superior in doctrine than in the spiritual journey of the other person.

Brethren, we are to have the **attitude** of Christ in all things. And that attitude is *love*. Let us not replicate the character of the religious elite of the first century who were steeped in much knowledge but knew nothing. Let us be humble in our dialogue, gentle in our disagreements, and respectful in our delivery no matter what we do. Not a single commandment was given whose intent was to affect our behavior. It was given to affect our *character*. So as we seek to please Him and share our findings with others, let us do so with Christ-like humility and grace. Keep His commandments and let our traditions favor love and find themselves in support of the power of His Word.

Shalom,

Jim Staley - 12 March 2017

