

Tradition or Conviction?

Rev G. Vanden Berg

The sphere of the church on the earth, nominally speaking, is comprised of people who live either “by tradition” or “out of conviction.” Christian living, as we view it with our humanly fallible and very limited vision, sees many of us doing pretty much the same thing but the different reasons and motivations that lie behind every action remain hidden. We maintain, to be sure, a real distinction between ourselves and the world at large; we engage in our ecclesiastical affairs quite regularly; we contribute to the church; we assist various Christian Institutions; we listen to the Word preached; we eat and drink at the Lord's Table; we read the Bible daily; etc. . . . but, well may we pause a moment and recast a glance deeper into our hearts and ask, “Why all this?” lest we rumble on in the rut of Phariseeism.

Is it “by tradition” or “out of conviction?”

With a vast majority of professing Christians it is unquestionably the former that rules. Many indeed there are in every generation who say, “Lord, Lord,” but they do not enter the Kingdom. The reason simply is that their would-be Christian (?) life is motivated only by “tradition.” Because their ancestors of generations back belonged to “a church,” it is only natural that this custom be preserved. And “what church” to them makes little difference for as someone said to me just the other day, “I'm Lutheran now. I used to be Presbyterian but I don't think it makes any difference as it is all Protestantism.” These “traditional Christians” (?) learn to stay away from ‘shows’ and other ‘bad places’ just because it isn't the “way of Christian people” (although many have even departed from this tradition) and they learn to adjust themselves to live within a narrower circle than their ungodly neighbor. Especially during the winter season they are quite occupied because they are somewhat “traditionally compelled” to go to catechism, society, etc.

All “by tradition” . . .

In itself it is not wrong to live “by tradition.” Paul enjoins the Thessalonians to “hold the traditions which they had been taught” and further to break off fellowship with anyone that did not “walk after the traditions received of the apostles.” (II Thess. 2:15, 3:6) It is also true that we have received a priceless “Reformed” tradition both with respect to doctrine and life and we must constantly guard that we do not depart from it. A “traditional” walk is not necessarily an “evil life.”

“Legalism” and “Formalism” are the kinds of “traditionalism” that are detrimental. We must depart from the common habit of formally molding our lives into a rut with the stereotyped “do this” and “don't do that” for this mechanical living is not “Christian but Phariseeistic”. From such “traditions” the disciples of the Lord did not hesitate to depart. (Matt. 15, Mark 7). And the Lord said that those who walk in such ways are people “who honor God with their lips but whose heart is far from Him.” These kind “reject the commandment of God in order to abide in their own ‘tradition’ ”. Following the letter of the law is not Christian Living but is “spiritually killing.”

Let's have less of **that** traditionalism.

And more living “out of conviction”!

To live out of conviction is to do the things that we do because we know that we must do them. Let me add that this “**must**” is not one of human force but is a ‘necessity growing out of our faith.’ Conviction is faith. Faith is knowledge. Knowledge is understanding the will and

desire of God as revealed in His Word and joyously, willingly, and constantly applying that will to all of our deeds in any sphere of life. Living “out of conviction” means that we do what we do because we know that that is what God desires of us. Conviction says, “I do this because God requires it of me” where ‘tradition’ says, “I do this because others do it and it’s the accepted thing”. Conviction says, “I refrain from this because I know God abhors it” where ‘tradition’ says, “I abstain because I’ll be criticized if I don’t.”

Conviction “demands” that we “prove all things and keep what is good” (I Thess. 5:21).

This “requires” a thorough study and re-study of God’s Word. Only by knowing the truth will we experience “freedom in the truth.” Only by knowing “right” will we be able to retain “what is good.” That season is again here when in most of the churches the full schedule of activities will soon begin. No doubt you all will be among the active participants in the various spiritual exercises of church and society.

However, will you reap the spiritual blessings from your activity?

That depends: Will you engage “BY TRADITION” or “OUT OF CONVICTION?”

Your presence in the society is not enough. Too many find their places and listen in to the discussion and go along with the society by the “power of tradition.” Don’t YOU be one of those!!

Rather “exercise yourself unto godliness.” Be active in your society and be living in your church and “follow the traditions of the fathers out of conviction” and then NO ONE will benefit as much as YOU!

“As you sow ... so you shall also reap!”

Originally Published in:
Vol 12 No 1 October 1951