

When Man-Made Traditions in the Church Keep People Out

Growing up in a church that had many written and unwritten rules was not a positive experience. To me, each rule presented a challenge: Either figure out a way around it or live without it.

I could not relate to a faith experience that was dictated by a group of male rule-makers and the rules they established. Some of the rules were understandable—such as not drinking or smoking. As an adolescent, I had no business doing either.

The problem came when the rules became more important than relationships. Our family took rule-following to the extreme, and it affected all our relationships.

My brothers and I could not even drink a soft drink out of a can for fear someone would see one of us and think we were drinking beer. Actually, we were drinking beer when Dad wasn't looking. But seeing us drink out of a glass container made my father feel better.

As I said, this was one of those rules that made sense for an adolescent to follow. But rules that focus on a minor area of life can come to take precedence over the greater priorities of building character and connecting relationally. Why? Rather than creating a heart that is good, following a rule is something that makes the church and the family look good.

Majoring on Minors

Focusing more on minor rules than on the major issues of life was not the only problem I discovered when I was young. There were some unwritten rules that were just plain wrong.

One of the unwritten rules of our church was that we catered

to white people, especially white Christians. Although the leadership would never ask a person of color to leave, they would not go out of their way to show proper respect or make it comfortable for him or her either.

Our church was the largest and closest one to an area with a high concentration of African-Americans, but our church bus program never ran through those black neighborhoods. Nowhere would you find the “no blacks” rule in print, but it was written on the hearts of the membership and its leaders, and it was wrong.

There are other rules that stand in the way of wonderful people finding a relationship with our Lord. None is more destructive than a “we versus they” attitude leveled at any group.

Jesus reflected a “me for them” attitude. Whether He was talking with a woman caught in adultery or a crooked little tax collector up a tree, He was a gatherer of broken people, and He was committed to breaking the rules. In fact, Jesus was so “pro-sinner” that he was willing to upset the religious leaders of the day to reach those who were in need of His mercy. When I discovered what a rebel He was, I could finally relate to the One who had died to save me.

When Jesus walked the earth, He valued relationships over rules. He liberally broke the Jewish laws by healing on the Sabbath, sharing food with a known sinner and doing the wrong thing (according to the rules made by pompous men of the law) with the wrong people.

Jesus acted so unpredictably, so radically, so unexpectedly that His whole life was a challenge to the rule-makers and rule-keepers of His day. Their attitude was that if the God of the universe was not going to keep the rules of man, then God would have to be killed.

Human systems and rituals had induced many to lose their first

love as they focused on their own power rather than on the power of God. The religious authorities burdened people with heavy loads of “works” and offered no assistance to those they so heavily weighted. By the time they had established their self-made religion, people viewed God as a binder of hearts, a burdener of spirits, a vindictive, angry, distant and disinterested God who did not involve Himself with everyday people.

Jesus came to earth to change all that. As He lived out His life, His daily brushes with real people—real sinners—painted a different picture of a God who cared, who transformed and who loved more than anyone could ever imagine.

Relationships Over Rules

The New Testament displays Christ’s respect for people and His disregard for those who do not care about them. To Him, it was better to heal a man on the Sabbath than to wait for Monday to come so as not to cause a stir.

The Pharisees, because of their religious rules, could not get excited about a healing that would take place on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6). They had no intention of celebrating a miracle that God had to break a man-made rule to accomplish.

A Samaritan woman at a well and an adulteress caught in the act were two more examples of Christ’s respect for all kinds of people, even the wrong kinds of people. From His life, I came to conclude that a healthy faith is respectful of others.

In addition to Christ’s example, we have the direct pronouncement of this tenet in Philippians 2:3: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourself” (NIV). As simple as this verse is to understand, it has been quite difficult to fully believe and live out.

But when you have more of Jesus and less of your religion, respect for others is always the outcome. Paul's first letter to Timothy carries this theme. Respect bubbles up from Paul's heart for seniors, older men, older women, younger men, younger women, singles, widows, children and the needy—groups that historically have not always known or experienced respect (1 Tim. 5:1-3).

Christ made it clear that respect for others is a priority for the Christian. When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus stated, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Mark 12:30). Then He gave us the second most important rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (v. 31).

Christ's message was emphatic: If a rule doesn't jive with one of these two commandments, then hang the rule. Those who love rules more than they love people will never understand the true message of Christ.

Modern-day legalists act just like the Pharisees in the days of Christ. They are so caught up in the traditions and rigid rules of their own kingdoms they fail to see that mercy and grace are just as important as discipline and sacrifice (Hos. 6:6).

Love, not legalism, must reign. Then when a Spirit-filled connection is formed, even between people with different traditions or theologies, respect flows from the heart and changes attitudes and behaviors.

The Witness of the Past

Historical accounts prove that the spreading of the gospel brought new respect for those who previously were not respected. Wherever the gospel of Jesus Christ has taken root in a society and the Word of God has been taught and honored, respect for all men and women has grown along with it.

In Hawaii, it was once taboo for a woman to eat with a man. Women were expected to prepare and serve the meals and wait for the men to finish. Whatever was left was all that a woman was allowed to eat.

The place of women in Hawaiian society was lower than that of many pets. However, it all changed when the gospel came to the islands and Christ-centered men began to see women in a new way.

A new attitude of respect resulted in women being treated as though women and men are equally valuable to God and society. Instead of being used to put women down or keep them down, the applied truth of Scripture liberated women from religious rules made up by men solely for the purposes of men.

Oh, that this same gospel would be spread so that all exploitation of any human could be eradicated from the earth! Oh, that this same gospel would infect all Christians with respect for and honor toward others!

Liberated to Love

Considering its legalistic stance, I thought the church I grew up in would hold on to its old ways of thinking until the church took its last offering. But I was surprised to discover that the men could grow and change.

When my homosexual brother came back home with AIDS, I saw this formerly separatist church show love beyond expectation. My brother's illness came at a time when the houses of people with AIDS were being burned and men who professed Christ held up signs, "God Hates Fags." But none of that mattered to the deacons of our church.

They told my father that they had always loved our family, including my brother, and would continue to do so through the worst of this ordeal. They gathered together, laid hands on my brother and prayed for his healing.

Medical bills that were not covered by insurance were never a burden to my parents. Church leaders paid all the bills. Every day, until Jerry died in the bed of his childhood, someone was there to minister to him and the rest of the family.

At my brother's funeral, the church was packed with those who cared more about loving than judging, and it was that loving that had brought him back to Christ. I will see my brother in heaven because they chose to respect him rather than reject him.

Sadly, the liberation to love and respect others has not overtaken many Christians. I often wonder if people ever read the New Testament to see the way Jesus reached out to the "least of these" and touched and changed their lives.

Jesus had a way of walking right into the midst of the rejected and the untouchables and drawing them to Him. He still does it today when we give first place to the law of love and allow His truth to pour out from our hearts and our hands. When we commit ourselves to having more Jesus and less of our ruthless religion, we feel His love and respectfully share it with those who are of no less importance to Him than we are.

Read a companion devotiona..

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