

## **Institutional Religion**

### **Why Tradition-bound Churches are Lifeless**

In referring to tradition-bound churches, I am not alluding to congregations governed by biblical principles. Nor am I referring to those who take conservative stands. Rather, I am thinking about those whose customs and rituals are more revered than God Himself.

#### **Tradition-bound Churches Worship out of Habit**

“Tradition worshippers” derive a sense of well-being from their religious routine. This is true regardless of the doctrinal context. Even those who are fundamentally right in their doctrine can be foundationally wrong in their devotion.

Adam hid from God amidst the trees in Eden. Multitudes today hide from God in the pews of their churches. Anything outside their “religious box” is viewed as a potential menace—even God! The sobering fact is God’s chosen people rejected God’s only Son because He did not fit into their box. They had elevated their traditions above the commandments of God and became hardened. Sadly they did not have ears to hear—no capacity to discern the voice of God. Since their hearts were closed, the Spirit of God passed them up.

There is a perception of safety in that which is customary—a sense of security in the predictable. By the same token, a cemetery is calm and peaceful. There are no surprises there—only DEATH!

#### **Tradition Worshippers are Bound to the Past**

The Samaritan woman in John chapter four was adamant, *Our fathers worshipped in this mountain*. Institutional religion places an overemphasis on forms, places, and days. These are the criteria from which their judgments are made. The reasoning goes, “If that’s the way we’ve always done it, then that’s the way we should do it now.” There may be value in remembering our heritage, but it is not always wise to judge the present in light of the past.

Dedication to a memory or a man may have some merit, but the focus in a life-giving church is on the future. The need for visionary leaders has never been greater. The “good ole days” are gone and they are not coming back. Instead of sighing about what’s been lost, it’s time to take stock of “what is” and get going.

Evangelism is the life-blood of the church and without it congregations will die. One of the preachers at a recent Prayer Advance commented on people’s receptivity to the gospel. When it comes to receiving Christ he said, “some will, some won’t, so what, somebody is waiting.” Outreach takes place in the present and its effects are felt in the future.

## **Tradition-bound Churches are Intolerant of Change**

Ingrown churches often believe change is synonymous with compromise. Effectiveness is inconsequential because the goal is not necessarily to bear fruit, but to “hold the line.” This they will do even if nobody gets into the lifeboat! When the institution becomes an end in itself it can retain its forms and traditions without the Holy Spirit. That is what makes this so scary—it is possible to do “right things” in the “right way” and yet be oblivious to the lifelessness which surrounds us.

Institutional churches take on a life of their own apart from God. They still function, hold services, and do good things even though Christ is outside the door, as at Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-17). While the Laodiceans were self-satisfied, God was threatening to spew them out of His mouth!

The tradition-bound often define themselves in negative terms: “We don’t do this,” or “We don’t do that.” They tend to be known for the things they are against, rather than the things they favor. Their steadfast commitment to the “status quo” is worn as a badge of honor even though the church is stagnant.

## **Rediscovering God-given Mission**

Pastor, if your church is stuck in the mud, go out and win souls to Christ. New life and new blood will stir things up, as well as your own heart. Preach to the people you have, but don’t neglect the hungry-hearts on the outside. Holy huddles have a limited “shelf life.” God’s people, especially young people, need tracks to run on in Christian service and without a challenge they will move on, or quit.

It is true that some tradition-worshippers may not appreciate “outsiders” coming into “their church.” It is also true that while you are preaching some in, you may preach some of the dead wood out. But you are not going to get a different result by continuing on a maintenance path.

If you want to see a better day you must embrace your biblical calling. Our mission is the Great Commission. We are commanded to go, preach, baptize, and teach. Our ultimate allegiance is to Christ Himself and His commandments, not an institution or its conventions.

Some time ago a pastor commented to me, “The fundamental churches in our area are not the life-giving churches.” Tradition-bound churches are lifeless, but “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (2 Cor. 3:17). Is your church hamstrung by tedious ritual, or Spirit-filled?

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