

TRADITIONS

Recently, our fellowship decided to abandon “Baptist Church” for its public persona. We have always been registered officially as a Baptist church – yet it was felt by a few of our members that using the less formal (but more traditional) “chapel”, would better convey the continuity of our heritage. I’m glad it came up: It made me feel hugely privileged to be part of the body of Christ where the feelings of individuals actually matter....and where love and unity are more important than what the paperwork says.

But this issue prompted me to think about tradition in a wider sense. Christianity and tradition have always gone hand in hand – from the High Church ‘smells and bells’, to the habitual flag-waving found in many Charismatic services. Some traditions may seem a little bizarre to outsiders: On my travels, I’ve come across churches that suspend members for growing facial hair (but only the men); one that is a union of two fringe sects, where members have to ‘speak in tongues’ but can’t eat pork - and another where entering the pulpit is conditional on being clean-shaven and wearing a tie. It’s just as well Jesus won’t be preaching at that one.

Traditions may have a variety of origins. Most churches like to think *theirs* come directly from scripture, but few actually do. True, some derive from *misunderstandings* of scripture. There are denominations today that owe their existence to taking bible verses out of context – most obviously, the American sect known as ‘snake handlers’: These well-meaning but insane people insist on playing with rattlers (often with unfortunate results) because they have misapplied scripture. Here in the UK, there are fellowships which refuse to distinguish between their women and their *other* livestock – merely because they’ve failed to understand the context of Paul’s letters to the churches, and *why* he wrote them.

There are some traditions which can be beneficial – helping people to focus their minds on God. Nonetheless, tradition – in all its forms – contains an inherent danger: Over time, it can come to be seen as integral to the faith, rather than as just an appendage. Jesus brought this problem up with the Pharisees, accusing them of teaching rules made by men, and of setting aside the commands of God for the sake of their traditions. It seems the human race has ever been addicted to ritual.

The purposes of church (or chapel!) are clearly laid out in the bible. Foremost among them, are to make disciples, to prepare Christians for works of service, and to build them up to reach their potential – to help them become people with more than a passing resemblance to Christ. Any tradition which actually aids this process has value.

At the chapel, we have a few traditions of our own. Not all of them are helpful. For example, the pastor has to make at least one gaffe per service...like forgetting communion, reading the wrong notices, or getting the hymns muddled up. Some have unkindly suggested that this has more to do with the choice of pastor, than with tradition – though I bet they’d miss it, if I suddenly became efficient. But of course, we’re never likely to find out, are we? One of our *better* traditions, is offering hospitality - especially over the Christmas period. We’d like to invite you to our Christmas services, and hope very much you’ll come along and enjoy spending time with us...as we celebrate the season in the time-honoured and *traditional* way!