

Matthew 28:16-20

“What should the Church Teach Disciples to Observe?”

16 Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them.

17 When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted.

18 And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

20 "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

I have come to refer half-jokingly to this sermon as my yearly Grinch sermon, because in it I try to explain why it is I and the rest of the mean old session have stolen Christmas. But I don't want to just address the issue of Holy Days today, if I may, what I would like to do is speak to you from the heart about the guiding confession of this church and what is that directs us in our faith and worship. I am not lying when I say that this is the most difficult sermon for me to preach every year, because I know that I'm messing with tradition, and disconnecting tradition and emotion is virtually impossible. It's also because people tend to be naturally conservative. We tend to resist change.

And also because I hate disappointing people. I'm not lying when I say that I really do want everyone in the church to be happy and contented all the time. After all, every week I ask you to make a decision that if taken will result in your being perfectly happy and well-content forever, and try to persuade you *not* to follow a course that will result in your being absolutely miserable for all eternity.

But I know also that I am a man under authority, and that someday I will have to give an account for my ministry, and I will have to give an account to Jesus for everything that I taught *his* sheep, because that is what you are brothers and sisters, Christ's little lambs, not *my* little lambs. I love you all, and I mean that sincerely, but I didn't die on the cross for your sins, and I am not the head of the church. And unlike Christ, I am not infallible. And so every time I am up here, my mind goes over what it says in *James 3:1 My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.*

You know its funny, because of that as more people join the church, my trepidation levels actually go up. John Brown of Haddington, once wrote to a bright young minister who was mortified that he had been called to minister a tiny church in the highlands. Regarding the size of his congregation he *counseled* “*assure yourself, on the word of an old man, that when you come to give an account on them to the Lord Christ, at His judgement-seat, you will think you have had enough.*”

So if someday, I am going to be called to give an account for everything I have taught or failed to teach to the sheep Christ gave me to care for, what should and should I not teach them? What rules should I be teaching you to observe? Perhaps most basically, what should I be telling you we should do when we gather for worship?

That's a critical question, what should the church teach disciples to observe? Do I, for instance, have an authority to create new commandments, rites, and traditions for you to observe if I think that they will be helpful?

Well what did Jesus say to his disciples as he was about to ascend into heaven? He told them that they were to carry the gospel to all nations and then when the gospel had done its converting work and made new *disciples – that is mathetes- pupils, learners* – they were to baptize them in the name of the trinity and then teach them, what? Verse 20: ***to observe all things that I have commanded you***
The church is commissioned to go and teach, what Jesus, the one who has all authority, commanded in His Word.

That “All things” there is extremely important, it means that ministers like me are not allowed to selectively edit and leave things out. You remember when Paul was delivering his parting address to the Ephesian elders, he said ***“I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable”*** and ***Acts 20:26 “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. 27 “For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.”*** Boy, that is difficult.

You ever have some nice unbeliever you are friends with ask you ***“So you think I’m going to Hell???”*** Now there’s a question most of us would just love to dodge. Or how about when a Christian buddy hands you a book or a movie that is just theologically toxic, ***“you just gotta read this book by Benny Hinn!”*** that’s fun to answer isn’t it? [Possible ACES HIGH Furball example “day off”] Well, it’s at times like that when you have to say if I love this person I will not shrink, I will not shun. I won’t edit. I’ll tell them the whole truth. I’ll do it in love, but I’ll do it.

So even when we might like to, we mustn’t take away from the Word. But also, we mustn’t add things to it. Now that has been a huge problem in the history of the church, when Jesus came to earth for instance, he was dealing with a covenant community that had been adding their own traditions to God’s word for *hundreds of years*, and when they noticed that Jesus and His Apostles weren’t observing their traditions they got downright furious, turn with me to Mark 7:5 would you:

Mark 7:5 Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?"

6 He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me.

7 And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'

8 "For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men -- the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do."

9 He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.

10 "For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.'

11 "But you say, 'If a man says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban" -- ' (that is, a gift to God),

12 "then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother,

13 "making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do."

Jesus here is rebuking the Pharisees for teaching their traditions, the inventions of men as if they were the word of God. Now keep in mind, the Pharisees hadn’t just made this stuff up, their fathers had done it, their grandfathers had done it, their great-grandfathers. As far back as anyone could remember, they’d been observing these traditions. You want to get someone mad tell them they are wrong, want

to make them hopping mad, tell ‘em their cherished family traditions are sinful. You will run into that if you do evangelism with RCs or Greek Orthodox, they will quickly realize you are saying their families have been wrong about the Christian faith for generations.

Unfortunately, within a few hundred years of Christ’s words on that mountain, when he told the church exactly what he wanted them to do, the church began to get the idea that they had authority to create traditions, and rites, and ceremonies, and rules of their own. So for instance, as they moved into new cultures which had their own traditions, they co-opted them and Christianized them so that Christianity would be more acceptable to that culture. So that as they increasingly moved into societies that had traditionally practiced the worship of Goddesses, the Virgin Mary gradually became more important in Christian worship and practice, until the humble handmaiden of the Lord was blasphemously close to become a member of the Godhead herself.

Also as they moved into cultures that had traditionally observed religious feasts on certain days, they often took those days and put Christian Holy Days with similar emphases on them. It got to the point were by the middle ages there was hardly a day in the year that was sacred to some saint or had some commemoration of a biblical event.

One famous example occurred in the fourth century when the Church began to observe the feast of the nativity of Jesus Christ at the same time as the Saturnalia, a pagan festival beginning on the December 17th. We know the feast of the nativity as Christmas. And no, Jesus was almost certainly not born in December, he was probably born in April. And no, the Apostles didn’t celebrate Christmas. No Christians did for the first 300 years after the birth of Christ. Why was that? Because they weren’t commanded to by Christ.

Now when the Reformation came, when it came to worship the Reformers rediscovered three critical principles:

- 1) That all authority had been give to Christ, not the church. He alone had the power to command men’s consciences
- 2) That Scripture was sufficient rule and guide for all of our faith, life, and practice, and that by following it “the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:17)
- 3) That the traditions of men have “indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion” Col. 2:23 but were ultimately of no value no matter how antique they were.

So to quote the great Puritan Minister, John Owen: ***“In things which concern the worship of God, the commanding power is Christ, and his command the adequate rule and measure of our obedience. The teaching, commanding, and enjoining of others to do and observe those commands, is the duty of those entrusted with Christ’s authority under him. Their commission to teach and enjoin, and our duty to do and observe, have the same rules, the same measure, bounds, and limits. What they teach and enjoin beyond what Christ hath commanded, they do it not by virtue of any commission from him; what we do beyond what he hath commanded, we do it not in obedience to him; — what they so teach, they do it in their own name, not his; what we so do, we do in our own strength, not his, nor to his glory.”***

So they set about returning Worship to its biblical simplicity, they said in essence, let us do nothing in worship we don't have a warrant for in Scripture, because we don't have authority to command God's people to do anything that he has not commanded.

So the Reformers set about the hard task of clearing away centuries of traditions that had no foundation in scripture. That was tough. I mean imagine, for centuries your family has been going to confession – no more. For centuries the priests haven't been able to be openly married – now your minister has a wife, for centuries they've said the mass in Latin, now they are preaching in the same language you speak. You've always celebrated this feast day at the Cathedral – no more. Change after change.

One of the things that the Reformed in the British Isles, and that includes the Puritans, the Presbyterians, the Baptists, and the Congregationalists did away with, was the religious observance of Holy Days like Christmas and Easter, and their descendents in America continued in not observing any day as Holy, except the Lord's Day, the Christian Sabbath. So here in the USA for over 200 years, unless you were Episcopal or Lutheran, or Roman Catholic, you didn't observe Christmas in Church. And those denominations only observed them because they held to quote the Episcopalian 39 Articles: ***“The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies...”***

Now that changed in the late 19th and early 20th century, but for social rather than theological reasons - in fact the churches began to do more and more things that had no foundation in the commands of Christ.

But what about us? Well the session of this church is committed to the principle that we will not teach you to observe anything as part of worship that is not a command of Christ. That means no skits, no ballet, no flag waving, no hopping on one leg, no St. Swithins day, no Lent, and yes no Christmas and no Easter.

Now we know exactly how weird that is in the modern context. I remember just a couple of years after I became a Christian, I was working a book table for a conference at our church and talking to the Senior Pastor when a lady raced up....

Now I'm cognizant of the fact that many of you might have questions, about this, let me try to anticipate some of them – others you should feel free to ask of myself and the elders whenever you want to, there are also several copies of an article I wrote that has been published in a couple of magazines and a book entitled ***“Why Do Presbyterians Observe Holy Days?” on the table outside.***

Objections: 3 →

Not observing Christmas is downright un-American!

Not telling you can't observe all the cultural aspects in your home. There its similar to July 4th, Veterans Day, and so on. But remember this, for hundreds of years most Americans DIDN'T celebrate Christmas. How many of you know the name John Witherspoon?

Alexander Hamilton, Jonathan Edwards, Dabney and Stonewall, countless other American patriots and founding fathers who never did. In fact, as a national holiday, Christmas only really started gathering speed in the late 1800s for instance, the first Christmas tree in the White House was 1889.

Hey, look at this way, you are returning to the practice of the majority of the founding fathers!

Objections, its harmless, and it does what Jesus wants in the first place, isn't it a great evangelism tool?

- Almost Every tradition that the church decreed for centuries had exactly that objective, all of them.
- If we just add this and take away that, it will make the gospel more palatable.
- Since when should we adopt a "Let's not burn the Chariots of Canaan, let's use them ourselves!" rule
- Takes away from the principle of the sufficiency of scripture, was the worship of the apostles really incomplete?

Does this mean you are saying people who observe Christmas aren't Christian???

Not at all

Well what advantage does this "no traditions of men policy have?"

- Eliminates preferences
- Ensures we aren't blown to and fro
- Safeguards your Christian Liberty
- Means I won't have something else to answer for.
- Reduces Schism
- We have done very well
- SAFEGUARDS THE AUTHORITY OF CHRIST! – Kids who has authority over you?