

Can a Christian Go To a Bar?

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Mark 7:1-9

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On January 25th, 2008, two pastors entered a bar in Carlisle Pennsylvania. Pastor Chuck and his assistant Carol entered a bar and spent the entire evening chatting and drinking amid the smoke and noise of a typical downtown pub. Why do you suppose they were there? And why did this story make the local news the next day and national news the following week? Was it controversy that caught everyone's attention or was it something else?

The plan was to put clergy in the downtown bars once a month just in case someone needed to talk. Instead of expecting people to come to them, these ministers went out to the people. Interesting idea, but what did other Christians think? Well, some reminded us to not be a part of this world. Some felt that the people in these places would be too drunk to know what happened in the morning anyway! I wasn't surprised by this reaction. It is, after all, an unconventional way to share the love of Christ. But what I found amazing was that many people spent more time discussing how this type of evangelism should be handled rather than celebrating the results. You can read all about this at

http://mondaymorninginsight.com/index.php/site/comments/sothese_two_pastors_walk_into_a_bar/

I've noticed that it typically doesn't take too long for people to begin discussing HOW something should be done instead of talking about WHY it is done in the first place. This is a battle Jesus faced time and time again.

As Jesus and His disciples hung around Capernaum, and even though many had stopped following Him, people still continued to come to Him for healing and help. He must have been there for a while because some Pharisees and teachers of the Jewish Laws came down from Jerusalem. And it appears their whole intent was to watch the process.

¹ One day some Pharisees and teachers of religious law arrived from Jerusalem to see Jesus. ² They noticed that some of his disciples failed to follow the Jewish ritual of hand washing before eating. ³ (The Jews, especially the Pharisees, do not eat

until they have poured water over their cupped hands, as required by their ancient traditions. ⁴ (And) they don't eat anything from the market until they immerse their hands in water. This is but one of many traditions they have clung to—such as their ceremonial washing of cups, pitchers, and kettles.) ⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of religious law asked him, “Why don't your disciples follow our age-old tradition? They eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony.” ⁶ Jesus replied, “You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁷ Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.’ ⁸ For you ignore God's law and substitute your own tradition.” ⁹ Then he said, “You skillfully sidestep God's law in order to hold on to your own tradition”. ¹ (Mark 7:1-9)

Can you imagine how Jesus must have felt? Here He was caring and working and loving these people, doing so much that He and His disciples barely have enough time to eat a meal. And along comes this group of religious leaders who fuss about the process and not what was being accomplished. It didn't seem to matter that people were being healed and lives were being changed. They fussed about the HOW but did not care about the WHY. Can you imagine how frustrated Jesus must have been? Notice what He has to say to these men in verse 6 (“You hypocrites!”).

I think you and I need to be careful lest we cause Jesus to be just as frustrated with us. It is so easy for us to slip into this same trap where the way things are done become more important than the people who may be reached. When someone is serving and loving people with a heart full of pure motives, the last thing I want to do is come along and pour cold water on their fire; criticizing them because they didn't do things in a traditional way. If I came upon a group of people standing on a street corner passing a peanut butter sandwich and a Mt. Dew between them saying “Do this in remembrance of Me”, I don't want to ruin the spirit of the moment by pointing out that it must be grape juice and unleavened bread pricked 5 times for it to be correct. I want to be able to look beyond what is traditional and celebrate the

¹Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. "Text edition"--Spine. (2nd ed.) (Mk 7:1-9). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

fact that a few people took communion, even though it was unconventional or untraditional. So if we need to be careful, then how do we keep from becoming like these legalistic Pharisees who lofted tradition above results? How can you and I keep our minds focused on WHY something is being done rather than HOW?

What had happened here was that tradition was given the same authority as scripture (verse 7) and even replaced scripture (verse 9). So it seems to me that probably the best way to combat this tendency is to make ourselves familiar with what scripture actually commands and what Jesus Himself has actually said. And to then recognize the difference between what has been commanded and what is simply tradition. But this is not an easy task because so much of what we do as a church is merely tradition; all the way from how the building looks to the order of our service.

Rather than making this an overwhelming task though, I started to wonder if this whole thing couldn't be summarized into a simple phrase to remember when we are confronted by something that is not traditional, like doing Love Feast in a different way, for example. Well, my mind continued to be drawn to a passage in Philippians where Paul, once the Pharisee who held tradition in high regard, shared this reminder with the church. **“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”**² (Philippians 2:3-4). And I honestly believe if we can get our minds off of ourselves for just a moment, we'll be able to see that even though something is done in an unconventional way, a person's life has been changed, and they have been drawn closer to God in the process. And is this not what we have been commanded to do in the first place?

²*New American Standard Bible : 1995 update*. 1995 (Php 2:3-4). LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.