

Rites and Customs of the Church

by J.H. Newman

J.H. Newman emphasizes the significance of Church traditions and rituals as foundational to Christian faith and practice, rooted in Apostolic teachings.

Scripture: Acts 13:2, 1 Corinthians 1:16, 1 Corinthians 11:2, 1 Corinthians 15:29, 2 Thessalonians 2:15

Topics: "Church Tradition", "Sacred Rituals"

Description

J.H. Newman discusses the importance of adhering to traditions and rituals in the Church, even when they are not explicitly mentioned in the Apostolic writings, emphasizing that these practices were recognized by the Apostles and were based on religious principles. He highlights the significance of rituals like the use of the cross in baptism, the covering of heads during worship, and the practice of household baptism, all of which have roots in early Church traditions. Newman points out that these rituals serve as visible memorials of important doctrines and truths, connecting believers to the teachings of Scripture and the Apostles.

Transcript

He who is duly strengthened in faith, does not go so far as to require argument and reason for what is enjoined, but is satisfied with the tradition alone.

Chrysost. in 1 Cor. Hom. 26.

THE reader of ecclesiastical history is sometimes surprised at finding observances and customs generally received in the Church at an early date, which have not express warrant in the Apostolic writings; e. g. the use of the cross in baptism. The following pages will be directed to the consideration of this circumstance; with a view of suggesting from those writings themselves, that a minute ritual was contemporaneous with them, that the Apostles recognise it as existing and binding, that it was founded on religious principles, and tended to the inculcation of religious truth. Not that any formal proof is attainable or conceivable, considering the brevity and subjects of the inspired documents; but such fair evidence of the fact, as may recommend it to the belief of the earnest and single-minded Christian. It is abundantly evident that the Epistles were not written to prescribe and enforce the Ritual of religion; all then we can expect, if it existed in the days of the Apostles, is an occasional allusion to it in their Epistles as existing, and a plain acquiescence in it: and thus much we find.

Let us consider that remarkable passage, (1 Cor. xi. 2--16.) which, I am persuaded, most readers pass over as if they could get little instruction from it. St. Paul is therein blaming the Corinthians for not adhering to the custom of the Church, which prescribed that men should wear their hair short, and that women should have their head covered during divine service; a custom apparently most unimportant, if any one ever was, but in his view strictly binding on Christians. He begins by implying that it is one out of many rules or traditions ([Greek text: *paradoxeis*]) which he had given them, and they were bound to keep. He ends by refusing to argue with any one who obstinately cavils at it and rejects it: "If any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the Churches of GOD." Here then at once a view is opened to us which is quite sufficient to remove the surprise we might otherwise feel at the multitude of rites, which were in use in the Primitive Church, but about which the New Testament is silent; and further, to command our obedience to such as come down to us from the first ages, and are agreeable to Scripture.

In accordance with this conclusion, is the clear and forcible command given by the Apostle, (2 Thess. ii. 15.) "Brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle."

To return. St. Paul goes on to give the reason of the usage, for the satisfaction of the weak brethren at Corinth. It was, he implies, a symbol or development (so to say) of the principle of the subordination of the woman to the man, and a memorial of the history of our creation; nay it was founded in "nature," i. e. natural reason. And lastly, it had a practical object: the woman ought to have her head covered "because of the angels." We need not stop to inquire what this reason was; but it was a reason of a practical nature which the Corinthians understood, though we may not. If it mean, as is probable, "because she is in the sight of the heavenly angels," (1 Tim. v. 21.) it gives a still greater importance to the ceremonies of worship, as connecting them with the unseen world.

It would seem indeed as if the very multiplicity of the details of the Church ritual made it plainly impossible for St. Paul to write them all down, or to do more than remind the Corinthians of his way of conducting religious discipline when he was among them. "Be ye followers of me;" he says, "I praise you that ye remember me in all things." It is evident there are ten thousand little points in the working of any large system, which a present instructor alone can settle. Hence it is customary at present, when a school is set up, or when any novel manufacture in trade, or extraordinary machinery, is to be brought into use, to set it going by sending a person fully skilled in its practical details. Such was St. Paul as regards the system of Christian discipline and worship; and when he could not go himself, he sent Timothy in his place. He says in the 4th chapter: "I beseech you, be ye followers of me. For this cause have I sent unto you Timotheus, who shall bring you into remembrance of my ways which be in CHRIST, as I teach every where in every Church." Here there is a like reference to an uniform system of discipline,-- whether as to Christian conduct, worship, or Church government.

Another important allusion appears to be contained in the 22nd verse of the chapter above commented on. "What, have ye not houses to eat and drink in? or despise ye the Church of GOD?" This is remarkable as being a solitary allusion in Scripture to houses of prayer under the Christian system, which nevertheless we know from ecclesiastical history were used from the very first. Here then is a most solemn ordinance of primitive Christianity, which barely escapes, if it escapes, omission in Scripture.

A passing allusion is made in another passage of the same Epistle, to the use of the word Amen at the conclusion of the Eucharistical prayer, as it is preserved after it and all other prayers to this day. Thus the ritual of the Apostles descended to minutiae, and these so invariable in their use, as to allow of an appeal

to them.

In the original institution of the Eucharist, as recorded in the Gospels, there is no mention of consecrating the cup; but in 1 Cor. x. 16, St. Paul calls it "the cup of blessing, which we bless." This incidental information, vouchsafed to us in Scripture, should lead us to be very cautious how we put aside other usages of the early Church concerning this sacrament, which do not happen to be clearly mentioned in Scripture; as e. g. the solemn offering of the elements to GOD by way of pleading His mercy through CHRIST, which seems to have been universal in the Church, till Popery corrupted it.

As regards the same Sacrament, let us consider the use of the word [Greek text: leitourgounton], ministering, (Acts xiii. 2.); a word which, dropt (so to say) by accident, and interpreted, as is reasonable, by its use in the services of the Jewish Law, (I. luke i. 23; Heb. x. 11.) remarkably coincides with the [Greek text: leitourgia] of the Primitive Church, according to which the offering of the Altar was intercessory, as pleading CHRIST'S merits before the throne of grace.

Again, in 1 Cor. xv. 29, we incidentally discover the existence of persons who are styled "the baptized for the dead." Perhaps it is impossible to determine what is meant by this phrase, on which little light is thrown by early writers. However, any how it seems to refer to a custom of the Church, which was so usual as to admit of an appeal to it, which St. Paul approved, yet which he did not in the Epistle directly enforce, and but casually mentions.

In 1 Cor. i. 16, St. Paul happens to inform us that he baptized the household of Stephanus. It has pleased the HOLY SPIRIT to preserve to us this fact; by which is detected the existence of a rule of discipline for which the express doctrinal parts of Scripture afford but indirect warrant, viz. the custom of household baptism. (Vid. also Acts xvi. 15. 33.) This accidental disclosure accurately anticipates the after practice of the early Church, according to which families, infants included, were baptized, and that on a weighty doctrinal reason; viz. that all men were born in sin and in the wrath of GOD, and needed to be individually translated into that kingdom of grace, into which baptism is the initiation.

These instances, then, not to notice others of a like or a different kind, are surely sufficient to reconcile us to the complete ritual system which breaks upon us in the writings of the Fathers. If any parts of it indeed are contrary to Scripture, that is of course a decisive reason at once for believing them to be additions and corruptions of the original ceremonial; but till this is shown, we are bound to venerate what is certainly primitive, and probably is apostolic.

It will be remarked, moreover, that many of the religious observances of the early Church are expressly built upon words of Scripture, and intended to be a visible memorial of them, after the manner of St. Paul's directions about the respective habits of men and women, which was just now noticed. Metaphorical or mystical descriptions were represented by a corresponding literal action. Our LORD Himself authorised this procedure when He took up the metaphor of the prophets concerning the fountain opened for our cleansing (Zech. xiii. 1.) and represented it in the visible rite of baptism. Accordingly, from the frequent mention of oil in Scripture as the emblem of spiritual gifts, (Is. lxi. 1--3, &c.) it was actually used in the Primitive Church in the ceremony of admitting catechumens, and in baptizing. And here again they had the precedent of the Apostles, who applied it in effecting their miraculous cures. (Mark vi. 13. James v. 14.) And so from the figurative mention in Scripture of salt, as the necessary preparation of every religious sacrifice, it was in use in the Western Church, in the ceremony of admitting converts into the rank of catechumens. So again from Phil. ii. 10, it was customary to bow the head at the name of JESUS. It

were endless to multiply in stances of a similar pious attention to the very words of Scripture, as their custom of continual public prayer from such passages as Luke xviii. 7; or of burying the bodies of martyrs under the altar, from Rev. vi. 9; or of the white vestments of the officiating ministers, from Rev. iv. 4.

Two passages on the subject from the Fathers shall now be laid before the reader, by way of further illustration, and first from Tertullian:

"Though this observance has not been determined by any text of Scripture, yet it is established by custom, which doubtless is derived from Apostolic tradition. For how can an usage ever obtain, which has not first been given by tradition? But you say, even though tradition can be produced, still a written (Scripture) authority must be demanded. Let us examine, then, how far it is true, that an Apostolic tradition itself, unless written in Scripture, is inadmissible. Now I will give up the point at once, if it is not already determined by instances of other observances, which are maintained without any Scripture proof, on the mere plea of tradition, and the sanction of consequent custom. To begin with baptism. Before we enter the Water, we solemnly renounce the devil, his pomp, and his angels, in church in the presence of the Bishop. Then we are plunged in the water thrice, and answer certain questions over and above what the LORD has determined in the written gospel. After coming out of it, we taste a mixture of milk and honey; and for a whole week from that day we abstain from our daily bath. The sacrament of the Eucharist, though given by the LORD to all and at supper time, yet is celebrated in our meetings before day break, and only at the hand of our presiding ministers. We sign our forehead with the cross whenever we set out and walk, go in or out, dress, gird on our sandals, bathe, eat, light our lamps, sit or lie down to rest, whatever we do. If you demand a scripture rule for these and such like observances, we can give you none; all we say to you is, that tradition directs, usage sanctions, faith obeys. That reason justifies this tradition, usage, and faith, you will soon yourself see, or will easily learn from others; meanwhile you will do well to believe that there is a law to which obedience is due. I add one instance from the old dispensation. It is so usual among the Jewish females to veil their head, that they are even known by it. I ask where the law is to be found; the Apostle's decision of course is not to the point. Now if I no where find a law, it follows that tradition introduced the custom, which after wards was confirmed by the Apostle when he explained the reason of it. These instances are enough to show that a tradition, even though not in Scripture, still binds our conduct, if a continuous usage be preserved as the witness of it."--Tertullian, de Coron. S 3.

Upon this passage it may be observed, that Tertullian, flourishing A. D. 200, is on the one hand a very early witness for the existence of the general doctrine which it contains, while on the other he gives no sanction to those later customs, which the Church of Rome upholds, but which cannot be clearly traced to primitive times.

St. Basil, whose work on the HOLY SPIRIT, S 66, shall next be cited, flourished in the middle of the fourth century, 150 years after Tertullian, and was of a very different school; yet he will be found to be in exact agreement with him on the subject before us, viz. that the ritual of the Church was derived from the Apostles, and was based on religious principles and doctrines. He adds a reason for its not being given us in Scripture, which we may receive or reject as our judgment leads us, viz. that the rites were memorials of doctrines not intended for publication except among baptized Christians, whereas the Scriptures were open to all men. This at least is clear, that the ritual could scarcely have been given in detail in Scripture, without imparting to the Gospel the character of a burdensome ceremonial, and withdrawing our attention from its doctrines and precepts.

"Of those articles of doctrine and preaching, which are in the custody of the Church, some come to us in Scripture itself, some are conveyed to us by a continuous tradition in mystical depositories. Both have equal claims on our devotion and are received by all, at least by all who are in any respect Churchmen. For, should we attempt to supersede the usages which are not enjoined in Scripture as if unimportant, we should do most serious injury to Evangelical truth; nay, reduce it to a bare name. To take an obvious instance; which Apostle has taught us in Scripture to sign believers with the cross? Where does Scripture teach us to turn to the east in prayer? Which of the saints has left us recorded in Scripture the words of invocation at the consecration of the bread of the Eucharist, and of the cup of blessing? Thus we are not content with what Apostle or Evangelist has left on record, but we add other rites before and after it, as important to the celebration of the mystery, receiving them from a teaching distinct from Scripture. Moreover, we bless the water of baptism, and the oil for anointing, and also the candidate for baptism himself.....After the example of Moses, the Apostles and Fathers who modelled the Churches, were accustomed to lodge their sacred doctrine in mystic forms, as being secretly and silently conveyed...This is the reason why there is a tradition of observances independent of Scripture, lest doctrines, being exposed to the world, should be so familiar as to be despised.....We stand instead of kneeling at prayer on the Sunday; but all of us do not know the reason of this. Again, every time we kneel down and rise up, we show by our outward action, that sin has levelled us with the ground, and the loving mercy of our Creator has recalled us to heaven."

The conclusion to be drawn from all that has been said in these pages is this:--That rites and ordinances, far from being unmeaning, are in their nature capable of impressing our memories and imaginations with the great revealed verities; far from being superstitious, are expressly sanctioned in Scripture as to their principle, and delivered to the Church in their form by tradition. Further, that they varied in different countries, according to the respective founder of the Church in each. Thus e.g., St. John and St. Philip are known to have adopted the Jewish rule for observing Easter-day; while other Apostles celebrated it always on a Sunday. Lastly, that, although the details of the early ritual varied in importance, and corrupt additions were made in the middle ages, yet that, as a whole, the Catholic ritual was a precious possession; and if we, who have escaped from Popery, have lost not only the possession, but the sense of its value, it is a serious question whether we are not like men who recover from some grievous illness with the loss or injury of their sight or hearing;--whether we are not like the Jews returned from captivity, who could never find the rod of Aaron or the Ark of the Covenant, which, indeed, had ever been his from the world, but then was removed from the Temple itself.

OXFORD,

The Feast of St. Philip and St. James.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jh-newman/rites-and-customs-of-the-church/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net