

Customs and Traditions of the First Century Church of God

A Message from Jesus Ministry

Through His Friend
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Customs of the Church of God

Have we lost sight of the basic fundamentals of Christianity? Are we anywhere close to following the examples given by Jesus Christ and the original apostles?

It is good for us to inspect the history of the early Church to determine what has happened between then and now. We should be like Jude and want to, "...earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 1:3).

In this booklet we intend to give you a glimpse into the structure of the first century, New Testament Church. You can then decide for yourself if you are following its example.

As we look into the Word of God we see the Church is, "... built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Eph 2:20-22).

What does it mean "built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ, the apostles, and prophets"? **It was their examples and their teachings that were to be the foundation for the Church.** Jesus said to His disciples, "...If any *man* will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and **follow Me**" (Matt. 16:24). And the Apostle Paul said, "**Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ**" (1 Cor. 11:1). Are we following the examples and teachings of Jesus, the apostles, and prophets today?

The church in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses was told, "Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them [other nations], after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou inquire not after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? Even so will I do likewise.' **Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God: for every abomination to the LORD, which He hateth, have they done unto their gods;** for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods" (Deut. 12:30-31). **This is a principle given to us through the Prophet Moses that was quickly forgotten after the death of the original apostles.**

By the second and third century the churches had begun to accept pagan days and methods for worship into Christianity. This happened because they had, by that time, forgotten their roots and from where they had come. They would not have had any problem determining the course of action for the New Testament Church if they would have studied God's instructions to Israel, such as the one mentioned above, and the examples of Jesus and the twelve apostles.

Western Christianity has tried to get so far from the old Jewish system of worship that they went from the ditch of Judaism all the way across the road and into the ditch of pagan festivals. They would have been much better off to have continued the Jewish

festivals (without the rituals and sacrifices), as did the apostles and early Christians. It wasn't long before the Roman festival of Saturnalia, the worship of the sun, had been combined with the idea of Christmas. In their minds, it was the best of both worlds.

The problem is, it appears, no one bothered to ask Jesus Christ, the head of the Church, what He thought about this mixing of pagan festivals with Christian worship.

It seems no one inquired of God about whether they should create a day to celebrate Christ's birthday. The fact is, no one knows the day of Christ's birth! It was hidden for a reason. God didn't want us making a big deal about the birth of Jesus!

Basically the same concern happened with the transition from observing the Passover, as Jesus and the apostles did, to Easter. To most Christians it was of no importance. But there was a major problem occurring. By these changes, Satan was pulling most of Christianity away from their historical roots and God's plan. God revealed His outline for mankind through the holy days He gave Israel.

Easter is mentioned in one place in the Bible, but its pagan traditions have a long history that precedes Christianity by thousands of years. The word Easter that appears in Acts 12:4 is a blatant perversion of the word "Passover." And it is one of Satan's obvious tools used to deceive, if possible, the very elect of God. Adam Clark's commentary says of this major deception, "Perhaps there never was a more unhappy, not to say absurd, translation than that in our text." This means the word "Easter" was not in the original text or anywhere in the New Testament.

The early New Testament Church of God never followed Easter. They observed the Passover, but not in the way the Jews did. The Jewish system required the sacrifice of a lamb. Christians realized Jesus Christ was our Passover Lamb—the perfect Lamb of God. **There was a change in the methods, but not in observing the day.** It was kept as a reminder of what Jesus did and His part in God's plan.

After Jesus established the custom of the New Testament Passover using the bread and the wine to replace a Passover lamb, He then set the tone of humility for the Church by washing the disciples' feet. He said, "For **I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.** Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. **If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them**" (John 13:15-17 NKJV).

Even into the second century of the New Testament Church of God we see the Passover staunchly defended by Polycarp while the Western churches were being overrun with the ideas of Easter. We learn from accounts of the Church that Polycarp, disciple of the Apostle John, was the "...**superior authority, at Rome itself, in maintaining apostolic doctrine and suppressing heresy.** 'He it was, who coming to Rome,' says Irenaeus (Vol. 1. p. 416), 'in the time of Anicetus, **caused many to turn away from the aforesaid heretics (viz. Valentinus and Marcion) [this was the Easter heresy] to the**

Church of God, proclaiming that *he had received this one and sole truth from the Apostles...*” Around the same time period it was, “**Irenaeus [that] rebukes Victor [Victorinus] for his dogmatism about Easter, and reproaches him with departing from the example of his predecessors...**” (*The Early Church Fathers: Ante Nicene Fathers, Vol. 3, II*). It was Polycarp that came west to Rome to put down the heretical teaching of Easter and strove to maintain the custom and tradition of Passover in the Church of God.

The Doctrine of Christ

As we begin this study of the New Testament, we need to be absolutely clear about the differences between the doctrine of Christ and the customs and traditions of the early New Testament Church. For an in-depth study of *The Doctrine of Christ* please drop us a note with a return address and we will be happy to send you a bound copy free and without obligation. You can also download a PDF copy from our website free as well.

Customary Days of Worship for the Church

As we glance into the early childhood of Jesus in Luke 2:41-43 we see, “Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the **Passover**. And when He was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem [as usual] after the custom of the feast. And when they had fulfilled the days, as they returned, the child Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and His mother knew not *of it*.” We see this keeping of the feast of the Passover was a custom the parents of Jesus observed every year. Jesus too kept this festival.

Luke said of Joseph and Mary that, “when they had fulfilled the days” they then began to return to Nazareth. The days that were being fulfilled were the **Days of Unleavened Bread**. Luke also said in Acts 20:6, “And we sailed away from Philippi **after the Days of Unleavened Bread**, and came unto them to Troas in five days; where we abode seven days.”

The Apostle Paul, speaking about the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread, went on to say, “Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us: **Therefore let us keep the Feast**, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but **with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth**” (1 Cor. 5:7-8). “Therefore” means because of the aforementioned fact. **Because Jesus was sacrificed for us is the reason we keep the Feast of the Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread, not Easter!**

Here Paul clarifies and spells out how we are to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread under the New Covenant. Paul speaks of the spiritual application of these days when he said, “Purge out therefore the old leaven [the old way of life], that ye may be a new lump [the new man], as ye are unleavened.” How is a Christian unleavened? Christians are now unleavened—not by getting rid of leavened bread but through the forgiveness of sin offered by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

We, as Christians, must purge out from our thoughts the puffed up attitudes of the “old man” or our “old nature” that was in us. Now we are unleavened by accepting the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our sins. It was Jesus that was recognized by the Father as the perfect sacrifice for all our sins. Waving the wave sheaf offering by the Jewish priests during the Days of Unleavened Bread was a type of Jesus Christ being approved by the Father after His resurrection for the payment of our sins. This act allows us now to be unleavened spiritually.

Paul made a definitive statement. Because Jesus Christ is our Passover sacrifice, **“Therefore let us keep the feast”!** But the way Christians keep the Days of Unleavened Bread is different from the way the Jewish people keep these days. Paul was saying here that we are to keep the Christian Days of Unleavened Bread with an unleavened heart and an attitude of sincerity and truth. You see God, in the New Covenant, is not interested in leavened or unleavened bread, He is interested in our unleavened hearts, minds, and attitudes. God said, “...to this *man* will I look, *even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at My word*” (Isa. 66:2). And in John 4:23 Jesus said, “...the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him.”

Jesus also had another custom. “And He [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up: and, as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the **Sabbath** day, and stood up for to read” (Luke 4:16). So we learn it was a custom for Jesus to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath day to worship. Jesus didn’t do this because it was commanded, “...The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath: Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27-28). The Sabbath was made to benefit man by giving us time to build a relationship with God. And remember, the Ten Commandments were designed by God for all those who do not have that right relationship with Him. (See 1 Tim. 1:8-11.)

The disciples were gathered on the day of Pentecost. They were told by Jesus to wait until the Holy Spirit would come. “And when the day of **Pentecost** was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place” (Acts 2:1).

Paul showed the importance of the custom of keeping the Day of Pentecost. “For Paul had determined to sail by Ephesus, because he would not spend the time in Asia: for he hasted, **if it were possible for him, to be at Jerusalem the day of Pentecost**” (Acts 20:16). He wanted to be with the brethren at Jerusalem to worship on the day of Pentecost.

Again the Apostle Paul revealed his personal interest and respect for the day of Pentecost in 1 Corinthians 16:8-9. But this time, however, he was not going to sail on by Ephesus, “But I will tarry at Ephesus until **Pentecost**. For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and *there are many adversaries.*” In this case he would not leave until after Pentecost.

In Acts 27:9-11 we discover Luke writing, “ Now when much time was spent, and when sailing was now dangerous, because the fast [This was a reference to the **Day of Atonement**—the traditional day of fasting according to the Jewish sacred calendar.] was now already past, Paul admonished *them*, and said to them, ‘Sirs, I perceive that this voyage will be with hurt and much damage, not only of the lading and ship, but also of our lives.’ Nevertheless the centurion believed the master and the owner of the ship, more than those things which were spoken by Paul.”

In John 7 the **Feast of Tabernacles** and the **Last Great Day** are shown. We see Jesus setting us an example of observing these days. It had been a part of His custom and tradition to observe these fall festival days. First I want you to notice that Jesus made a point not to attend all of the Feast of Tabernacles because the Jewish leaders were seeking to kill Him. Now if these days were an absolute command, Jesus would have had to keep all of them, at the place designated, to prevent sinning and losing His place as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. But Jesus chose to keep only part of these days at Jerusalem.

The Last Great Day of the Feast was called, by some, the eighth day of the Feast because it was immediately after the seven days of the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus was also observing this day as well, as we see in verse 37.

This use of the Holy Convocations of the Old Covenant to mark time is no different from our use of holidays to mark time today. These Holy Convocations were customary days of worship for them.

There is an important point to remember about these days. Paul is using these festival days as points of references among Christians in foreign countries! This shows us that these days were a significant part of the customs, traditions, and culture of both the Jewish and Gentile New Testament Churches of God!

A list of these days given to Israel can be found in Leviticus 23, “And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, ‘Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, ‘Concerning the **Feasts of the LORD**, which ye shall proclaim *to be holy convocations, even these are My Feasts*’” (Lev. 23:1-2). These days were not given to Israel just to keep them busy; they were given to help Israel get to know God and His plan better.

These Feasts of the Eternal have hidden within them the outline of God’s plan for mankind. When we lose sight of these days and their meanings, we miss the complete gospel Jesus brought. Holy convocations were not commanded in the New Covenant, neither are they included in the Doctrine of Christ, but they are part of the customs and traditions of both the Old and New Testament Churches.

Days for Worship Are Part of Christian Traditions Not Doctrine

In the fourteenth chapter of Romans the Apostle Paul wrote about a few things that some Christians, those weak in the faith, may have problems with understanding correctly. None of these items should be issues of doctrine. Among them were foods, drink, and days for worship. “One person esteems *one* day above another; another esteems every day *alike*. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes *it* to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe *it*...” (vv. 5-6 NKJV). Paul said, regarding these things, “Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in *his* brother’s way” (Rom. 14:13).

The first century Church of God had traditional days for worship. If a newly converted person wanted to worship on a different day than the Church did, they were not to make an issue of it; the same was true about food and drink. The only exceptions were those covered at the headquarters conference at Jerusalem where James made this decision based on how God was working with Paul as the Apostle to the gentiles, “...that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and *from* fornication, and *from* things strangled, and *from* blood” (Acts 15:20).

So we see that days for worship are not a matter of doctrine under the New Covenant, but days of worship have been part of the traditions of the Church of God. Of this Paul said, “...for whatever *is* not from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23 NJKV).

Jesus leveled some serious charges to the leadership of the Jewish church when He said, “Howbeit in vain do they worship Me, teaching *for* doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men... Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition” (Mark 7:7-9).

Let’s look through the pages of the New Testament and see for ourselves how the convocations of the Old Covenant were observed under the New Covenant. As we have already noticed, Jesus had a custom of worshiping on the Sabbath at the synagogue. We also saw that it was the custom of both Jesus and His parents to keep the Spring Festivals of the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread.

The last of Christ’s Passovers was also recorded for our education. In Matthew 26:17-18 we see, “Now the first *day* of the *Feast of Unleavened Bread* the disciples came to Jesus, saying unto Him, ‘Where wilt thou that we prepare for thee to eat the Passover?’ And He said, ‘Go into the city to such a man, and say unto him, “The Master saith, ‘My time is at hand; I will keep the Passover at thy house with My disciples.”’”” You see, all during the physical life of our Master, from childhood until His last meal with His disciples, Jesus was accustomed to observing the Passover.

It was customary for Jesus to be at the Fall Festival as well. “Now the Jews’ Feast of Tabernacles was at hand. His brethren therefore said unto Him, ‘Depart hence, and go into Judaea, that thy disciples also may see the works that thou doest. For *there is* no man *that* doeth any thing in secret, and he himself seeketh to be known openly. If thou do these things, show thyself to the world. For neither did His brethren believe in Him. Then Jesus said unto them, ‘My time is not yet come: but your time is always ready. The world cannot hate you; but Me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil. **Go ye up unto this Feast: I go not up yet unto this Feast; for My time is not yet full come**’” (John 7:2-8).

We see here that, while Jesus was accustomed to attending the Fall Festival of Tabernacles, He was not compelled to be at every part of it as a matter of command or so as not to break the law. He told His brothers to go ahead to the Feast and He would be along a little later. His attendance at these festivals shows the importance of these days in outlining God’s plan for the salvation of mankind and establishing the Kingdom of God on this earth.

Some people are under a false assumption the Festival of the Passover ended and was replaced with a totally new and different service. Jesus did not give any statement to indicate such a change. The Feast is still the Passover but it now has a New Covenant application. There was a change in the way the Passover was observed. The foot washing, the bread, and wine were given to show our New Covenant Passover relationship with Jesus Christ and our fellow brethren. The Passover still keeps us in remembrance of the sacrifice of the perfect Lamb of God—Jesus Christ as a very important part of God’s plan.

Other Customs of the Church of God

The custom for men to have short hair and woman to have longer hair is a custom in the Church of God. “Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for *her* hair is given her for a covering. But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God” (1 Cor. 11:14-16).

“Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

When it comes to praying Jesus said, “And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites *are*: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee

openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen *do*: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking” (Matt. 6:5-7). It was a custom in the first century Church of God not to use memorized prayers, time after time, without understanding or conscious thought.

Tradition of Hard Work in the Church

And then in II Thessalonians 3:6-14 Paul went on to say, “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; Neither did we eat any man’s bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you: Not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an ensample unto you to follow us. For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread. But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing. And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.” Good behavior and the habit of hard work was a standing tradition in the first century Church.

The Apostle Paul said in II Thess. 2:15, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.”

What Difference Does it Make for us Today?

Many in churches around the world today will shrug their shoulders and say, “What difference does it make for us today? We are used to keeping Easter and Christmas and besides it feels so good. The kids have so much fun with the egg rolling and Easter egg hunts. And at Christmas, the kids all expect gifts. Anyway we do all this to honor God.”

If we are going to take the name “Christian” at all, it is imperative that we do all we can to follow Christ. The Church should have decorum. We must have good customs, proper manners, suitable behavior, modesty, correctness, restraint, respectability, and unanimity within the Church. We need to bring new believers from where they are to where God wants them to be. We are not to allow them to drag into the Church any pagan, Satan-filled ideas they may have had before becoming Christian. And this is not done by judging them, but rather setting them a good example by our teachings, customs, traditions, and principles from Jesus Christ, the Apostles, and the Prophets!

What we eat and the days we keep are matters over which we should not be judging one another. Paul said, “Accept other believers who are weak in faith [This doesn’t mean we leave them weak in the faith! Neither should we accept every wrong habit they had before they came into the church!], and don’t argue with them about what they think is

right or wrong” (Rom. 14:1 NLT). We should not allow sedition and heresy within the Church!

We must, “...earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 1:3). We are not to judge them but we can teach them sound doctrine, help strengthen their faith, and bring them from where they are to a point where they will be able to teach others the doctrine, customs, and traditions of the Church.

This is the purpose of the offices of service within the body of Christ—the Church. The Apostle Paul clarified this by showing that Christ has given, “...some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; **For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ**” (Eph. 4:11-13).

You see, we are not to let the weak run the Church of God. Neither are we to judge them as they are coming into a better understanding of the Truth. We are to help them grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Until we all come into a unified faith—a common understanding of the Truth.

Today we live in a “Christian” society that knows little about what Jesus Christ taught. Over the centuries the teachings and doctrine of the original first century Church of God have been watered down and mixed with error. The teachings of Jesus Christ and the original Apostles are hard to find within some areas of Christianity today.

So what is a worshiper of God suppose to do? We must do as Jude said and “...earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 1:3). “He who says he abides in Him [Christ] ought himself also to walk just as He walked” (1 John 2:6 NKJV).

If we obey the teachings and commandments of Jesus, His love will be perfected in us. And as John said, if we abide in Christ we ought to do as He did and follow His examples.

Peter also said, “For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in His steps” (1 Pet. 2:21 NLT).

Set your mind to live as closely to the examples of Jesus and the Apostles as you can! That means to change those wrong personal thoughts and ideas. “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5).

Jesus said to His disciples, “...If any *man* will come after Me, let him deny himself [and the commandments of men], and take up his cross, and **follow Me**” (Matt. 16:24).

Jesus said to follow Him. And the Apostle Paul said, “**Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ**” (1 Cor. 11:1).

If we are going to declare ourselves to be Christian by accepting the blood of Christ, then we ought to follow Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of our faith. (See Hebrews 12:2.) And we should follow His teachings and the examples of the Apostles of the first century Church of God.

The Apostle Paul summed it up this way, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is your reasonable service*. And do not be conformed to this world [or the religious ideas and teaching of this world], but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Rom. 12:1-2).

Take the time to prove once and for all what are the customs and traditions of the first century Church of God. “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21).

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