

Commandments of Men

Tad Morris

One sure way to offend the Creator is to start creating laws for Him. Jesus said in **Matthew 15:8-9**, *“These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”*

Traditions are necessary, and opinions are inevitable, but legislating and judging where God does not will incite the wrath of God. No man can legislate on behalf of God. There are a number of issues on which we might have a convicted, Bible-informed opinion, but it’s still just that – an opinion, not a commandment of God. These personal convictions, no matter how well-informed, cannot be projected onto other people as divine doctrines. How many families and churches have been torn apart over man-made doctrines? How many conflicts could be avoided if things outside the scope of the Bible were left outside the scope of the Church?

Paul’s instructions for handling these presumptuous commandments were less than gentle. He said in **Titus 1:13-14**, *“Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not giving heed to Jewish fables and commandments of men who turn from the truth.”* If there’s one truth in the church that must be accepted as absolutely and unequivocally true, it’s that God alone is the lawgiver. The modern church must be diligent to avoid the errors of the Pharisees. Jesus told them, *“All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition”* (**Mark 7:9**). Commandments of men do not complement the commandments of God. In every situation, they become a competition to the real divine law and an obstacle to real faithfulness.

Sometimes the hard part is identifying these man-made commandments. They have many forms, including both man-made prohibitions and man-made approvals. If God does not prohibit a thing (directly or by implication), I have no right to install a prohibition in the church on His behalf. If God does not approve of a thing, I have no right to approve of it on His behalf. It’s also okay to take a personal position and keep it personal. This is the spirit of **Romans 14:22**: *“Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.”* It’s also okay to not take a position at all! Life is easier when we realize we don’t have to have an opinion on everything.

The real trouble is if we take these silent issues in the Bible and make them public spectacles in the church. We cannot make personal convictions a point of contention between brethren or a condition of fellowship. **Romans 14:4-5**:

Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.

Even if we accept that our personal convictions are not in fact divine commandments, we might still be skeptical of our brethren that see things another way. This skepticism leads to segregation, and segregation leads to bitterness, and all of this inevitably leads to the rupture of families and churches.

I’d like to give some examples here, but doing so could aggravate the problem I’m saying we should avoid. Personal practices and convictions should remain personal and never become issues of Christian fellowship. The church, in its corporate form, must remain free from man-made doctrines, free from man-made approvals, and free from man-made prohibitions.

One anthem of the Restoration Movement was “Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent.” I appreciate that more now than I used to. God doesn't need our help.

Even in our personal lives, personal convictions and self-imposed rules are not the substance of our service to God. This, too, is a trap that must be avoided. Submitting to man-made rules does not necessarily make us more faithful. Paul explains in **Colossians 2:20-23**:

Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations-- "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," which all concern things which perish with the using--according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

Genuine faithfulness is not augmented or helped by man-made commandments.