

1 Epiphany 2 – John 2

The Holy Spirit creates faith where and when he pleases in those who hear the gospel. The wind blows where it wills. The Word of God works by itself. None of our own methods, however tried and true we think they are, can make the words of eternal life more effective, relevant, or new. Only Jesus makes all things new. Only Jesus reveals the glory of God. He doesn't do it according to our own timing. He revealed his glory in the time appointed by his Father in heaven. When his mother told him the wedding feast had run out of wine, he reminded her of this very point. His hour had not yet come. Mary therefore told the servants what every servant of God must learn. Listen to Jesus. Do whatever he says. Wait for his words. Because his words are not controlled by our own efforts of habits, however old or planned out they are. His words have the power in themselves to turn water into wine, to bring about our salvation, and gladden our hearts with confident faith in his mercy.

After tasting the water that Jesus had changed into wine, the manager of the feast complained to the groom. You're supposed to serve the better wine first and then bring out the inferior wine after everyone has had enough. Instead, the groom saved the best for last. Jesus brought something new. He came to make all things new. But people prefer their own ways over Jesus' ways. Jesus himself confirms this to be true. In Luke's Gospel, our Lord says, "No one, after drinking the old wine, desires the new, because he says that the old is better" (Luke 5:39). Jesus gives a new birth and a new life. He gives the mercy of God, which is new every morning. However, the old, sinful nature doesn't want what Jesus gives. It would rather rely on the old ways and familiar traditions, which give a sense of outward security and control but have no power to give us a good conscience before God.

No one, after drinking the old wine, desires the new, because he says that the old is better. With these words, Jesus was warning against the legalistic Pharisees who held onto their traditions, thinking they could make themselves pure by them. The religious leaders of Israel passed on these traditions, likely for good reasons. There's nothing wrong with having and passing down outward ceremonies. The six stone waterpots were used by the Jews for purification rituals. They were traditions handed down through the generations. But what's the point of these traditions? What's the purpose of outward ceremonies? They are meant to direct us to God's Word. Don't just wash the outside of the cup. Look to the promise of God who washes your conscience from sin by the blood of his Son. Don't just fast outwardly. Repent of your sin and turn your hungry heart to God who feeds you with his own righteousness and salvation. Old traditions passed down through the generations are good outward discipline if they are used to magnify God's Word, which directs the heart to repent and trust in God's Son. But our sinful hearts have a way of turning these old traditions into the main thing while ignoring the message of the gospel.

Younger generations like to ridicule and put down older generations. I suppose it's been going on for a while. As the Monkees boasted way back in 1966, "We're the new generation, and we've got something to say." A couple years before that, Bob Dylan declared to the old, stodgy parents of his day, "Your sons and daughters are beyond your control. The times they are a changing." And there have been a host of songs and shows and movies in popular culture since then, which portray the older generation as out of touch and lacking a fresh perspective. Fathers and husbands are portrayed as dumb and incompetent while mothers and wives are portrayed as stubborn and overbearing. We are told we need to learn from the children, and it all sounds so nice and profound. But it's often simply a ploy to keep us from teaching our children the time tested words of truth revealed in the Scriptures.

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We should be careful not to fall for these trendy tricks. The problem with the old, sinful nature isn't that it's too old fashioned. Yes, it's true that older people are flawed. It's easier to see the faults of your parents and grandparents as you get older. We shouldn't ridicule them like Ham did to his father Noah when he was passed out in his tent from drinking too much wine. Instead, like Shem and Japheth, we should cover up the faults of our fathers with the respect God has commanded us to show them. We also shouldn't assume that our own fresh perspective is automatically more practical or beneficial than those who went before us. We shouldn't thoughtlessly follow the traditions handed down by those who have gone before us. But we also shouldn't thoughtlessly disregard them either.

Our fathers in the faith have passed down to us traditions that they used to teach the faith. Our liturgy and hymns are time tested tools, which have put the Word of God into our ears, mouths, and hearts for generations. At our congregation, we use a hymnal that is over eighty years old. Now, if we insist on using it just because it is so old, then we are losing sight of the newness of the gospel, which we learn from so many of these hymns. But if we assume that newer must be better, then we are being just as foolish. What makes a song new? It isn't that it was written yesterday or in recent decades. It's not that it is an emotional expression of your spiritual feelings. It's not that it is peppy or fun to sing. Of course, we should enjoy it. But it's new when it articulates the gospel of Jesus Christ, drives you to repentance, strengthens your faith, and teaches you the doctrine of Scripture.

Our fathers in the faith taught us to be reverent in church. Don't run around in the sanctuary. Don't treat the house of God as a house of play and entertainment. Of course, if the gospel causes someone to jump up and dance for joy, who can condemn that? But we have also learned to have self-control for the sake of our fellow saints who gather to hear the Word. All things should be done decently and in good order. Of course, we shouldn't use this order in the church to cover up and suppress the newness of joy we receive from the gospel. And yet, we also shouldn't think that we are promoting the joy of the gospel just because we are throwing out the order, as if chaos is a sign of a new spiritual life.

The reason our fathers passed down good traditions wasn't because they were old fashioned. No, they passed them down to teach us the gospel in a disciplined and orderly way. So don't cling to the traditions for the traditions' sake. Yet, at the same time, don't think that getting rid of the traditions makes you more gospel minded.

The same goes for what our fathers taught us in everyday life. They taught us not to get drunk, not to use God's name in vain, and not to fornicate. They weren't being old fashioned when they told us not to spend the night at our girlfriend's house without her parents there. The Bible tells us not to give any appearance of evil, and our Lord teaches us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation." Our mothers weren't being old fashioned when they submitted to their husbands. The Bible says, "Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of his wife as Christ is head of the church." Our fathers weren't being old fashioned when they took charge to bring the family to church, lead the family devotions, and punish the children if they ever talked back to their mom. The Bible says, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her." Our grandparents weren't old fashioned when they insisted on meeting their children's boyfriends and girlfriends, giving their approval or disapproval based on whether these were good and godly suiters for their children. The Bible says, "Honor your father and mother," "Don't be unequally yoked with unbelievers," and "Train a child up in the way he should go."

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We shouldn't be so foolish to think that something is better just because it's new. What you think is new today will inevitably be old in the next generation. We shouldn't be so quick to dismiss old traditions just because they are old. Sure, maybe some of these traditions have lost their significance. Or maybe we just need to learn their significance. If you see a fence in the middle of a field, you should find out why it was put there in the first place before you tear it down. Who knows? It might still be useful. We might still have a lot to learn from what our fathers passed down to us.

Jesus replaced the old stone water pots with new vessels of good wine. He didn't destroy the old water pots. He didn't disregard them or throw them away. Instead, he made them even more significant. He showed us what these old traditions should truly be teaching us. Good traditions provide some kind of outward discipline. But this is only so we would listen to what our Lord says. Because his words make everything new. His words reveal the glory of God. His words give us his body and blood, given and shed for us for the forgiveness of our sins.

When we know the words of Christ, then we know the truth, which sets us free. But we aren't free to do whatever the trendy culture tells us what is good for us. Instead, Christ has freed us from sin. By the shedding of his blood, he has freed us from the wrath to come. He has cleansed our consciences from dead works so that we may serve the living God. He has given us his Holy Spirit so that we can think with renewed minds and discern what is the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God.

God doesn't call us simply to be old fashioned. The economic and social climate isn't the way it was when our grandparents were alive. Our lives obviously are different in many ways. But what makes us new in Christ is not that we have more advanced technology or that we have more social opportunities. It's that we have Christ and his Word, which he revealed through his prophets and apostles from ancient times. Those who rely on new measures are ultimately relying on the old, sinful flesh. No matter how many flashy performances they put on, they end up just as old and stodgy as those Pharisees who replaced the commandments of God with the traditions of men. Instead, any ceremony, whether it is old or more recent, should serve to discipline our bodies so that our ears would hear the doctrine of our Savior in its truth and purity.

Jesus did his first miracle during the oldest tradition known to man. It was a wedding. And yet, this tradition is more than just a manmade ceremony. God himself established marriage. In the beginning, in paradise, he joined Adam and his wife together to make them one. The world treats it as old and outdated. Husbands and wives are replaced with cohabitating partners. People think they are so clever because they have figured out a seemingly more convenient arrangement. But Jesus didn't come to destroy the old. He came to renew it. He came to redeem husbands, wives, and children by his blood. He cleanses us in the washing of water with the Word. This also isn't some manmade ceremony or work of our hands. It is his washing, his Word joined to the water to give us a good conscience before God.

Our sinful nature turns God's ancient works into old, boring, and outdated traditions of men. God gives us family so that we would be familiar with them. This provides outward order and security. A child can ask his parents anything with confidence that they will answer him. Siblings grow to know each other more than their closest friends. But these old, familiar companions also learn to bicker and fight. Husbands and wives easily grow tired of one another while brothers and sisters find each other annoying. The same thing often happens in church. The sinful nature grows bored and annoyed by familiar things and people. The world thinks the solution is to throw these old and boring things out and

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replace them with what seems more convenient. Replace marriage with modern living arrangements. Replace the ministry of the gospel with entertainment.

But our Lord doesn't make things new by throwing away what God has established. He didn't come to destroy the law. He came to fulfill it. He fulfilled more than mere traditions and ceremonies of men. He fulfilled the very will of God who created us, both men and women, boys and girls, in his own image. He gave himself up for all sinners, claiming us as his own church and bride cleansed from sin and guilt. He creates in us clean hearts by his Holy Spirit, upholding us by his free gospel, and causing us to bear fruit of love, joy, peace, and all good things. So whatever old traditions we follow, whatever has been passed down to us from our fathers and mothers, may it always serve this goal. May our hearts always be directed to the pure Word of our Savior. He has revealed his glory by saving us from sin and the old evil foe. He makes all things new. And the newness he gives is always better. Amen.