

By: Bob Russell

Church Attire – Human Tradition or Biblical Principle?

About 18 years ago, Kyle Idleman came to my office with a serious concern. Kyle was 26 years old and had been hired six months before to be on Southeast Christian church's teaching team. He was a phenomenal young preacher, and our congregation was enamored with him. At the time, I had been the senior pastor of the church for 36 years.

Kyle got right to the point. "I know you've got this policy that anyone who preaches at Southeast Christian is to wear a suit and tie. But I don't feel comfortable in a suit and tie. I feel like a hypocrite in a suit and tie. More importantly, I don't think I'm relating to my generation in a suit and tie."

Appropriate, respectful dress in worship was fairly important to me, so I responded, "Well, Kyle, we're worshipping Almighty God here. If you went to visit the president of the United States, don't you think you'd wear a suit and tie?" (I knew he wouldn't have a comeback for that!) But he responded quickly, "I'd probably not wear a tie if the president were my dad."

Wow! I wasn't ready for that answer. I should have had a good reply for him, but none came to mind. What did come to mind was a question for me: "Was I standing on a Scriptural principle or stubbornly fighting for a man-made tradition?" This was not the first time I had confronted the issue of our dress code with the church staff, and I had been churning about whether or not to lower the standard.

Over the years, I had prided myself on being flexible about matters of opinion. In leadership seminars, I encouraged ministers to be willing to employ new methods and not hold on to ineffective traditions. I often quoted a slogan, "Methods are many, principles are few, methods always change, principles never do." And, "In doctrine, unity; in opinion, liberty; and in all things charity." I often insisted, "The church that doesn't change, dies."

But when it came to our dress code, I had remained inflexible. I asked myself, "Is this a mountain I want to die on? Am I willing to run the risk of losing a talent like Kyle Idleman over whether he wears a scarf around his neck in the pulpit? What does the Bible say?" Look up "suit and tie" in a Biblical study concordance, and it's not there. I doubt if Simon Peter wore a three-piece suit when he preached on the Day of Pentecost.

After a long pause, I reluctantly conceded. "Okay, Kyle, you don't have to wear a suit and tie when you preach but be neat." The staff dress code changed overnight. While it was a big topic of conversation in the congregation for a while, most everyone eventually adapted to more casual apparel at church.

One Sunday, after I had been retired for a few years, I was sitting in the audience when Kyle walked out to preach. I thought, "Boy, he looks particularly slovenly today." He was wearing a wrinkled, untucked shirt, black jeans, and tennis shoes. But he opened the Bible and preached a powerful, Scriptural sermon on sexual purity. You could hear a pin drop.

At the end of his message, Kyle said, "Now if you have broken any one of these commandments from God, I want you to know God loves you, Christ died for you, He wants to forgive you, and wash you whiter than snow. He promised, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Then he surprised us by adding, "We're going to do something different to close our service today. For those of you who wish to give or rededicate your life to Christ by baptism, rather than just come forward and go to a side room to be counseled, I want you to come straight to the baptistery. I'm going to walk right into the baptistery now just as I am." (I thought, "Well, he's dressed for it!") Kyle continued, "And I'm going to ask you to join me there. Come as you are and express your desire to begin anew by being baptized. It's warm outside. You can go home wet. You don't need a robe or tee shirt. Come as you are to Christ."

We stood and began singing. I watched in awe for an hour and fifteen minutes as 117 people came forward to be baptized! That was only one of three worship services that morning. I estimated that over 50% of those who responded were under 35 years of age. I was so glad I hadn't made a Biblical principle out of a human opinion a few years earlier.

Here's my point. There are all kinds of traditions that Satan has used over the years to divide believers, split churches, and make people miserable. Drums, individual communion cups, choir robes, carpet color, fellowship suppers, selling of sermon tapes...on and on it goes.

As we age, it becomes increasingly difficult to accept changes in methodology. (My most significant change over the last decade was moving from regular Cheerios to Honey Nut Cheerios!) If we're not careful, we become hindrances to effective evangelism because of our negative, resistant attitudes. Like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, we tie burdens around the necks of people that are too heavy to bear.

The next time the church you attend makes a significant change which you find objectionable, ask yourself, "Is this a Biblical principle or a human tradition?" If it's a Biblical principle, stand firm and don't waver. Be strong and courageous and speak the truth in love. But if it's a change in tradition, swallow your pride and make adjustments. There's a great slogan in the Christian Church, "Where the Bible speaks, we speak. Where the Bible is silent, we are silent."

Amen!

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