



Traditions: Are they good or bad?

One doesn't have to look far to find a dead tradition. They lie around churches like the old tombstones of a church burial ground: rotting, crumbling, and yet too memory-filled to just dump over the hill somewhere.

But what about live traditions? Like faithful apple trees in the graveyard fencerow that bear fruit with the regularity of a ... *tradition*, they bless souls time and time again.

How do you turn a crumbling tombstone into a live apple tree? At this point my analogy sort of breaks down ... Yet for some people, those old, dead, dry traditions can never be revived: they HAVE to go! They have experienced traditions for years—dead, dry, hollow, and starting to stink—and they KNOW that church life never prospers if it is clogged with the tombstones of centuries gone by.

But come, let us reason together. Is the problem the tradition? Or is it the death?

A number of years ago I experienced a lesson that changed my life's perspective. For many years I had read of churches (the early church and the early Methodists,

for example) and individual Christians who held the tradition of fasting on a certain day a week. "How formal that must be," I told myself. To have a spiritual discipline like fasting become a weekly tradition?

All I could see was some musty, crumbling tombstones in a churchyard.

But one day the Lord granted me the ability to see a truth that has redeemed me from my suspicion of all things traditional: *traditions are what we make them to be*.

Fasting once a week on a scheduled day can either be a tombstone or an apple tree. Once I was liberated from my fear of tradition, I picked up the old (and it is *very* old, dating back to the first centuries of the Christian church) tradition of fasting once a week on a certain day.

And it was like a faithful old apple tree that bore me many blessings! The tradition became alive!

Now I am sure that I could easily turn that tradition into a tombstone. All I have to do is start doing it because I *have to* instead of because I *want to*. But as long as I have kept it alive, I have never regretted it. (And I will add that due to schedule issues, I have not kept it up at all times since I began.)

I write these words with a burden. For many years I have watched people react against traditions with the zeal of a religious reformer. Sometimes, yes, traditions do need to go. Or at least it certainly would not hurt anyone if they would disappear. But the problem is not always the tradition. Many times—in fact probably the majority of the time—the tradition is *not* the problem. The problem lies in the heart of the ones practicing the tradition with the deadness of an abandoned graveyard.

What happens when you sing a Gregorian chant with all your spirit tuned to the singing of it? It becomes alive! What happens when you give a holy kiss to a brother, with all the holiness and charity within you? It becomes alive! What happens when you revive the old custom of "love feast," practiced with lots of love? It becomes alive!

Let's be careful about reacting against traditions, and let's be careful about maintaining them.

Church traditions are what we make of them. Do it because you have to, and it is a dead tradition. Do it because you want to, and it may become a lifelong, living blessing!

~ Mike Atnip