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Dear Associates and Friends,

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Most everything you do is influenced by the customs of your society and culture. That is the subject of this month's presentation by Dr. Ernest Martin. It is titled "[Social Customs Versus Biblical Law](#)." This article explains how to deal with customs and traditions in relation to what God requires of each one of us.

Customs were important, even in biblical times. Look what the evangelist Stephen was accused of:

**"And [the people, elders, and scribes] set up false witnesses, which said, 'This man ceases not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place [the Temple], and shall change the CUSTOMS which Moses delivered [to] us.'"**

• Acts 6:13-14

When the apostle Paul went to Jerusalem, against the advice of prophecy saying he would be arrested, he went to visit James and the elders, leaders of the Jerusalem *ekklesia*. Here are some of the charges that were made against Paul. They are similar to the charges made against Stephen:

**"You see brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law: And they are informed of you, that you teach all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the CUSTOMS."**

• Acts 21:20-21

These customs were not the law of Moses. They referred to other requirements that the Pharisees made upon people according to an "oral law," that later became the Talmuds. Jesus called them, "**the tradition of men**" (Mark 7:8; Colossians 2:8) and "**the commandments of men**" (Matthew 15:9; Mark 7:7; Colossians 2:22; and Titus 1:14). These Jews believed Jesus was raised from the dead ("**many thousands ... which believe**"), yet they accused Paul of [1] disobedience to the law of Moses, [2] disobedience to the requirement of circumcision, and [3] disobedience to "**the customs.**" Paul defended himself against these false charges:

**"Men and brethren, though I have committed nothing against the people, or CUSTOMS of our fathers, yet was I delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans."**

• Acts 28:17

Birth, coming to maturity or the age of majority, marriage, having children, and death, are usual milestone events that most people go through in their lives, noting the passage of these events with family and friends. Every culture has created customs around observance of these major events, customs which are shared with others in the society in which they live.

### **Birth Customs**

All sorts of celebrations and customs accompany the birth of a child as practiced by various peoples around the world. Some customs differ between the birth of a boy or a girl. Some involve circumcision for boys, which is a Mosaic requirement for Israelites males on the 8<sup>th</sup> day after birth (Genesis 17:12), but this practice is nullified in the New Testament, basically because Christ's circumcision fulfills that requirement for each individual Israelite, past and present (Romans 15:8-9; Galatians 5:1-6, 6:12-15; Colossians 3:11).

Another important aspect of birth is that Christians who believe in Christ's resurrection from the dead (and not from a disembodied life) receive the Holy Spirit. This gives the believer a new birth, phrased in the King James Version as being "born again" (John 3:3, 7; 1 Peter 1:23).

### *Coming of Age Customs*

Most cultures have some sort of coming of age ceremonies, rituals, or celebrations that note the passage of time that a child has grown to most aspects of adulthood. The maturing of the coming of age celebrant varies with different cultures, and the rituals for boys and girls are usually different.

The Jewish Bar Mitzvah for boys and more recently Bat Mitzvah for girls are public recognitions that the individuals have completed a course of study in Jewish life and culture and are now old enough and educated enough to understand the Torah, the law of Moses. The apostle Paul calls the Torah "**a schoolmaster,**" which is probably referring to a graduation to adulthood:

**"Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. For you are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ."**

• **Galatians 3:24–27**

As Paul expresses it, belief in Christ's resurrection is the sign of beginning adulthood for Israelites and all believers.

When Jesus was twelve years old, after spending a Passover in Jerusalem His parents found that He was missing from the group they were traveling with. They searched for Him, eventually turning back to Jerusalem to look for Him.

**"... when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the CUSTOM of the feast. ... And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers."**

• **Luke 2:42, 46–47**

The entire story is found in Luke 2:41–52. Jesus answered His parents' sorrowful complaints saying: "**How is it that you sought me? know you not that I must be about my Father's business?**" (Luke 2:49). Jesus would have been at or near the age to stand for the Bar Mitzvah examination, Torah reading, and celebration.

### *Marriage Customs*

The identifying pattern for marriage is set in Genesis 2:24. It is later identified as similar to the ideal situation of Christ's relationship to the *ekklesia* in Ephesians 5:22–33. Marriage customs around the world are varied throughout history, yet they follow patterns. A public ceremony is usually involved with community "witnesses." Ceremonies can be civil, religious, or both. Some forms of celebration usually follows. and the customs of celebration vary greatly.

Psalm 45 shows Israelite marriage customs in the time of King David, as does Jesus' parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1–13). The Jews in Jesus time had a tradition of extended betrothal periods that were rigid in their requirements of what was allowed by the man and woman during that period. Marriage contracts were opportunities for bargaining between the man and the prospective bride's parent.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the Old Testament the situation of women as concubines was a formal institution, yet its parameters are not fully understood, even by the Jews in the Talmudic period, when concubinage had largely ended. The rights and responsibilities of the concubine and the man are ill-defined and quite likely changed over the Old Testament period.

Jesus, His mother and disciples attended what was likely a traditional Galilean wedding. The event was probably that of the marriage supper. Jesus assisted the celebration by turning water into the best wine anyone had tasted (John 2:1–11). His mother asked Him to help the wedding celebration, and He complied by enhancing the customs as a member of the community.

Jesus praised the state of marriage between a man and a woman, but He did not go into detail as to how ceremonies or other elements of marriage should be done. Marriage is a divine institution, a contract of the man and woman, which is dissolved by the death of one of the partners. In most societies there is some form of community participation to witness the marriage bond, but there was no revealed religious ceremony for marriage in biblical times. Today, there often is a religious component to weddings, particularly Christian weddings, and even a governmental component to the ceremony, such as a marriage license. Again, the Bible does not require a particular form of ceremony or celebration.<sup>2</sup>

The cultural traditions of marriage around the world are so varied as to seem that every small community has unique traditions and customs that differ even from neighboring regions, cities, and countries.

### *Customs of Death and Dying*

Now consider customs of the process of dying and the handling of the body and mourning after death. Many customs are derived from society's understanding of the death state. Some cultures and people believe (uninformed by Scripture) that life continues in some other form such as a disembodied state after death. Those descriptions vary greatly as to what the after-death state is like. The ancient Greeks believed in *hades*, a Greek term for the place or state of the dead, but the New Testament usage of *hades* modifies the pagan definition and understanding to conform with the Hebrew meaning of *sheol*, a situation of death when the spirit of man separates (is withdrawn by God) from the body. This dissolves the soul.

The biblical worldview is clear about death. When a person dies the personality ceases to exist completely (until the resurrection of the body at a later time), the body turns to dust, and the spirit is preserved by God until the resurrection from the dead, whether to physical life in the great white throne judgment or to the immortality of spiritual life. God in the Bible shows little concern for the disposition of the body after death, other than it be handled with respect.<sup>3</sup>

The Bible has examples of what others did in their burial customs. Joseph was the 2<sup>nd</sup> ruler in ancient Egypt under Pharaoh. When Joseph's father died, Jacob's body was embalmed and buried in the land of Israel at Shechem, 34 miles north of Jerusalem (Genesis 47:29–30, 49:29–33; Acts 7:15–16). When Joseph died, his body was embalmed to preserve it for later burial, also in Shechem (Genesis 50:24–26; Exodus 13:19; Joshua 24:32; Hebrews 11:22). Joseph did this for Jacob. Moses and Joshua did the same for Joseph.

Why did they go through all this? It was not because of any command from God, but rather they were the wishes of the people involved. It was their custom, a mix of two traditions: Egyptian (the embalming) and Abrahamic (the place of burial). So, the Jews had burial practices that varied over time. Again, there is no requirement for anyone to follow the biblical examples, nor are there any biblical prohibitions. Note the

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<sup>2</sup> Part of the charm of the play and movie *Fiddler on the Roof* was the depiction of three different marriage customs within one Jewish family in a 1905 Russian community. The customs presented ranged from highly religious marriage customs to an extremely secular one without family or friends.

Dr. Martin discusses the biblical understanding of marriage in his presentation, [Marriage, Divorce, Living Together and the Bible](#). What social interactions will be like in our resurrection to immortality in the Kingdom of God, to the extent we are told in Scripture, is explained from Scripture in [Chapter 29: Marriage and the Family in the Resurrection](#), from his book *Essentials of New Testament Doctrine*. After you read that chapter, read that book from beginning to end, as Dr. Martin designed it to be read.

<sup>3</sup> When the modern missionary movement began in the 1800s and the early missionaries went to Asia, it was believed that Asians worshipped their ancestors as gods. This may have been because the rulers and emperors of China and Japan were considered to be gods or have some sense of divinity attached to them that was worthy of worship. Later scholars came to understand that Asian peoples venerated their ancestors. They did not worship them, or few did so. It was customary in some circles to go through elaborate rituals to venerate the dead. Westerners mistook customs of veneration for worship.

custom in Jesus' day:

**“Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner [custom] of the Jews is to bury.”**

• **John 19:40**

Why did they do such procedures? It was the cultural tradition and custom to perform those internment procedures. There are no laws given by Moses regarding a “proper” manner for burial. Nor did Christ or the apostles give any guidance on such matters. The customs varied with the generations even in Judea. In the time of Christ the customary use of ossuaries came into vogue. (An ossuary is a small stone box in which desiccated bodily remains were placed for permanent storage.)

Later in Christian lands, depending on religious understanding and wealth, elaborate burial ceremonies and even small buildings called vaults or mausoleums are sometimes built to “house” the dead. Others simply bury or cremate the dead. All of those customs are fine, but there are no directives in the Bible for doing any one thing or another. We are free to follow whatever we wish in regard to such situations.

None of this matters, of course. As a believer, God will resurrect your body and put your spirit back into a body to re-create your soul in the resurrection. You will have the same personality, with the same memories (enhanced), but your body will be composed of spiritual flesh and bone, but without blood (God's Spirit will flow through every portion of your body). Your body will be restored to greater vitality than you can imagine and all your “parts” will work. You will have immortality because Christ's righteousness will be appropriated to you. You will be the same “person.” It will be you. Everyone who knows you will recognize you, just as the apostles recognized the risen Christ when He appeared to His disciples.

It will not matter how you died (say, swallowed whole by a fish like Jonah), or blown to bits, or lost at sea. It will not matter how you were buried. You will be resurrected to a different body. The customs that you learned from your society and culture will no longer be important.

For the rest of the physical world during the millennium, customs may be retained, rejected, or modified for those people who survive. Many customs of peoples around the world have no right or wrong to them. Usually no sin is attached to customs and traditions, unless there is idolatry involved with them (and idolatry is very often involved in pagan religious rituals and milestones of life). All idolatry will cease.

## **Thank You**

We all have a remarkable freedom in Christ. We have freedom to follow custom and tradition so long as we do not follow man and follow God as Dr. Martin explains in his article. This is not a time for ignorance.

**“And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. ... If the Son therefore shall make you free, you shall be free indeed.”**

• **John 8:32, 36**

We should all thank God for the freedom He has given us in the present day, indeed in this **“this present evil world [age]”** (Galatians 1:4). God's Son Jesus Christ allows us to know the truth as He teaches us His Word which we are presently free to read and study. It was not always that easy. We become free through learning — we become free to act independently of tradition, custom, and religion — to act with understanding and wisdom in the world according to God's Word, and to be free from the slavery of religion, both pagan and Christian.

We thank God that you give us the opportunity to present this information to you and the world primarily the result of the study, research and teaching of Dr. Ernest Martin. More is available, and God willing, more will come to you. You have blessed us in the past and we ask you to continue, so we can continue to bless you with meat, not milk. Thank you.

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