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RADITIONS

TO TRAMPLE OR TREASURE?

When we understand the freedom God has given the church, we are neither bound by traditions nor prone to ignore their value. by Gene A. Getz

Who would think of beginning a football game without singing our national anthem, or digging into a Thanksgiving feast without roast turkey on the table?

Tradition is a part of life. It's school colors and college cheers, "Yes, sir" and "Excuse me," worship at 11 and a potluck in Fellowship Hall.

Some traditions are superficial and just for fun. Others operate at a much deeper level. People in

all parts of the world develop forms and structures to meet their specific needs. And as social historians point out, over time we fixate on particular structures.

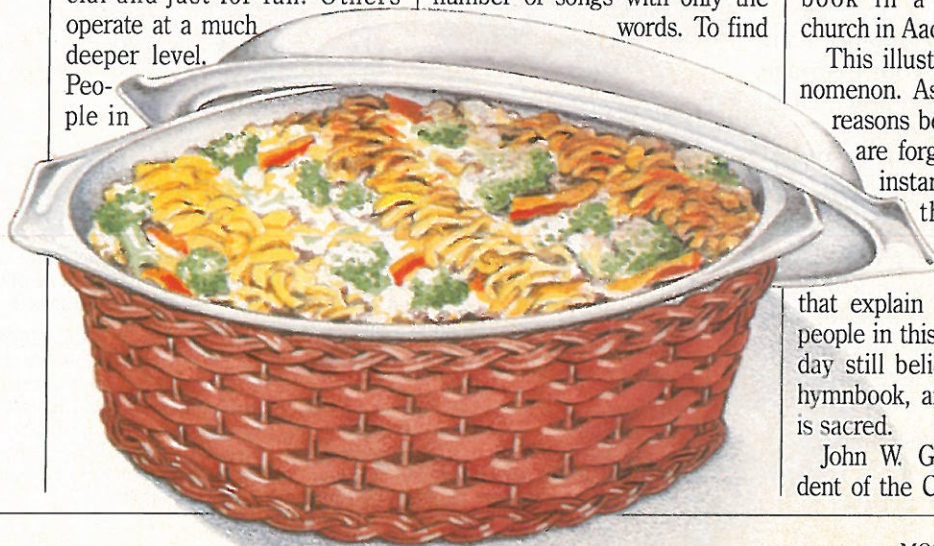
In the predominantly German community in which I grew up, much of what I thought was "Christian" actually only reflected our ethnic culture. For example, in church we used a hymnbook that contained a number of songs with only the words. To find

the musical score, you turned to another section. I used to think this was a sacred book, "designed by the Lord Himself."

Though I had long since understood the traditional aspects of this hymnbook, I was surprised several years ago to discover a similar hymnbook while worshipping in a Methodist church in Frankfurt, West Germany. And I was nearly shocked to find another similar hymnbook in a Roman Catholic church in Aachen.

This illustrates another phenomenon. As time goes on, the reasons behind our traditions are forgotten, but in many instances we perpetuate them even though they no longer meet the needs that explain their origin. Some people in this religious group today still believe this particular hymnbook, and its unique form, is sacred.

John W. Gardner, past president of the Carnegie Corp., has



HOW THEN SHALL WE PRAY?

studied form and structures in a more comprehensive sense and concludes that "like people and plants, organizations have a life cycle. They have a green and supple youth, a time of flourishing strength, and a gnarled old age."

When this process takes place, organizational structures (or forms) have become more important than the people who make up the organization, and people serve the organization more than the objectives that brought it into existence. In other words, "means" or "methods" have become "ends" in themselves. Traditions have turned to stone.

Christians are not exempt from this process. We, too, are people, albeit the people of God. And because we believe the Bible, we understand human needs at a much more significant level than people generally. We know about the reality of sin and the need for a salvation experience. Furthermore, we understand God's provision of salvation in His Son.

With conversion come new relationships. God never intended for His children to function in isolation. We are members of the body of Christ, the church. In this unique community, we collectively develop forms and structures to enable us to function as God intended.

We determine where to meet regularly, for God says we should not forsake "our own assembling together" (Heb. 10:25 NASB). We decide on the most

Let us pray." Heads bow. Eyes close. Hands fold. But it wasn't always that way.

Abraham fell on his face before God (Gen. 17:3). The psalmist bowed in worship (Psalm 95:6). Solomon stood before the Lord with his hands spread to heaven (1 King 8:22). Jesus knelt in Gethsemane (Luke 22:41).

How then shall we pray? In the absence of a clear directive of Scripture, traditions have come and gone. Jewish tradition allowed both kneeling and standing positions for prayer, but posture was the subject of unending rabbinic debate.

In the book of Acts, kneeling emerges as the most common position (9:40; 20:36).

In A.D. 220, church father Tertullian set down some practical hints for prayer. Uplifted hands were a common practice of that day. They need not be washed every time before prayer, Tertullian said, because they were clean as a result of baptism. Men need not lay aside their mantles to pray, though women and virgins should wear veils.

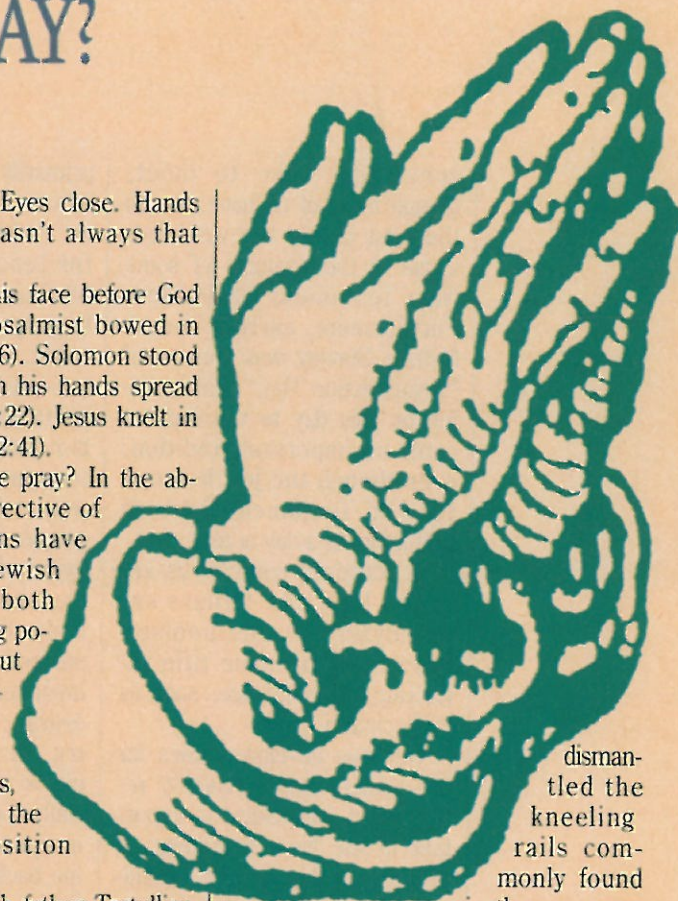
Tertullian felt it inappropriate to sit when conversing with God in prayer. Likewise he shunned kneeling on Sundays and Easter because they were days of celebration for the risen Lord.

Clement of Alexandria, also in the third century, prayed with uplifted hands and eyes gazing toward heaven.

Celtic monks in the sixth century stood and stretched out their arms horizontally in the "crossfigell" position to mimic the crucified Christ.

In the 13th century, Christina the Astonishing (aptly named) prayed while balanced on a hurdle. St. Patrick prayed 100 psalms with 200 genuflections.

After the Reformation, Protestants



dismantled the kneeling rails commonly found in the pews, re-

jecting them as an overemphasis of man's sinfulness rather than his joy in salvation.

Today, the attitude of reverence and submission once conveyed by prostration or kneeling is more commonly displayed by bowing in prayer.

Many Christians continue the practice of raising their outstretched arms to heaven, a gesture begun in the first and second centuries symbolic of receiving the Holy Spirit.

The "praying hands" so familiar today became a symbol of prayer thanks to a drawing by Albrecht Dürer.

No one knows who first closed his eyes to pray — some suggest the disciples in Gethsemane. Others are assured that whoever it was, it wasn't a parent with a two-year-old in the room.

Still, the practice remains as a means to close out distraction while concentrating on worshiping the Father in one manner clearly prescribed by Scripture: in spirit and in truth.

Amen. ■

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T R A D I T I O N S

convenient time to meet, though most of us have chosen the first day of the week because of the example of some New Testament Christians. Furthermore, early in church history, Sunday was considered "Resurrection Day," and meeting on this day to worship became an important tradition, even though the Jew honored the Old Testament Sabbath (Saturday) as a day of rest.

In addition, some of us are called Baptists. Others are Presbyterians, Methodists, Nazarenes, or some title reflecting independence, such as Bible church.

We have developed titles for our leaders that frequently reflect what we believe is important in the New Testament. If proclaiming the gospel is considered the most important emphasis when the church gathers, we often call our leader "the preacher." If we believe the church was designed primarily to be a family for worship and fellowship, we often call our leader "brother." If we believe the church meeting is a place

primarily to learn the Bible, we may call our leader "the teacher." Others use the term "pastor/teacher" or "minister." Staying close to New Testament language, we may use the term "elder," "bishop," or "pastor."

Somewhere along in our own particular social histories, we also developed certain meeting structures, such as beginning with a hymn, followed by a prayer and perhaps another hymn. Our leader presents a message or a lesson from the Bible. If evangelism is a major purpose, we always end with an invitation for salvation. And, of course, to maintain the ministry, we give people an opportunity to support the church financially. Some of us pass offering receptacles; others put a box in the back of the church building. Some Christians, following a more Jewish model, walk forward and place their offerings on a table.

The Biblical Way

We seldom acknowledge it, but the way we do most things in our churches do not have their roots in biblical examples and exhortations. Rather, we have used the freedom of Scripture to develop forms and structures to carry out biblical activities, such as

evangelizing, teaching, praying, giving, worshiping, singing, and encouraging.

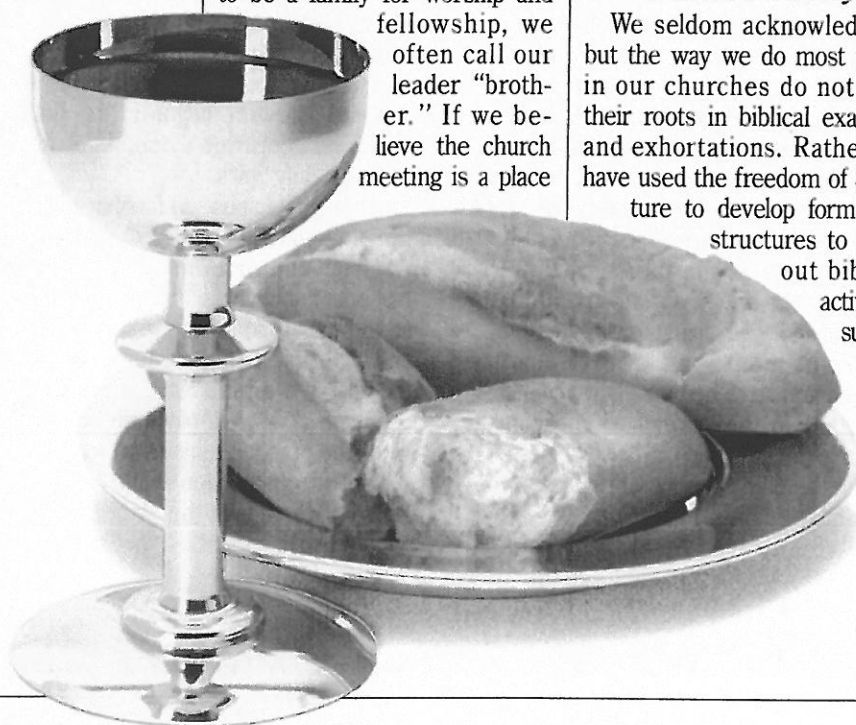
When, where, and how often to meet and the order of our services are not dictated in the Bible. In fact, for the most part, the way we do things in our 20th century churches is not described in Scripture at all.

For example, what is the biblical way to deliver a sermon? ~~Should it~~ be a verse-by-verse exposition of the Scriptures or a topical message? Should "the preacher" raise his voice when he speaks or deliver the message conversationally? Should the presentation be based on three major points or a series of connected ideas? Should he always end with an invitation for salvation?

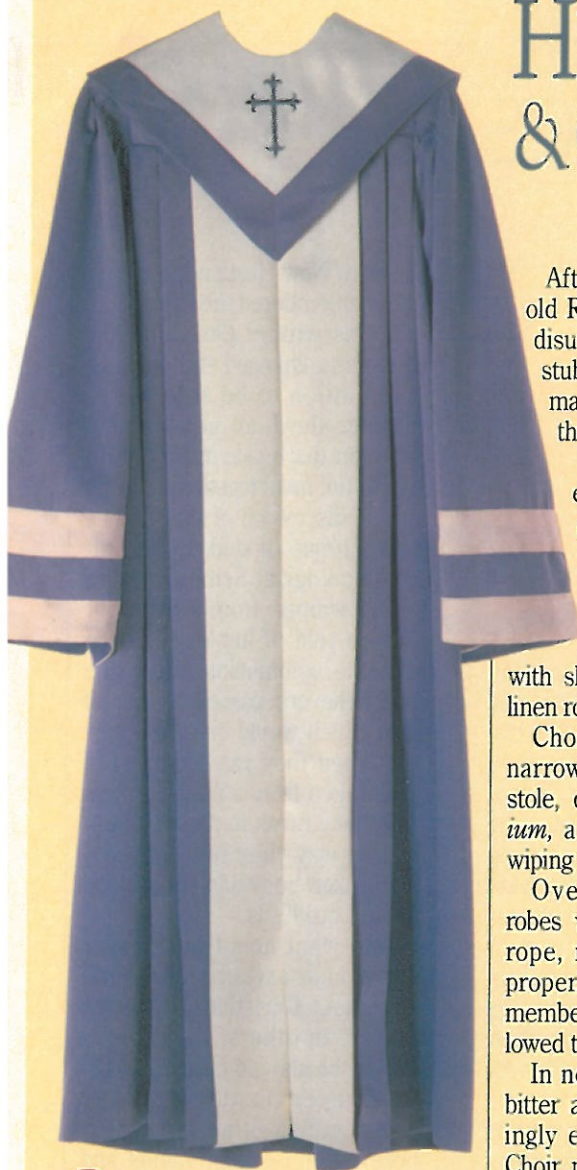
Speaking of invitations, should people be invited to "come forward" or be encouraged to "accept Christ" while they quietly deal with this issue in their hearts? Should a profession of Christ always be made public before the whole church, or should it be expressed to one or two people after the service?

These practices are not spelled out in Scripture or even illustrated. They represent patterns and methods we've developed over the years to carry out what we believe are priorities based on biblical principles. They are traditions.

Let's take this issue a step further. In some churches, the communion service is a highly guarded experience that follows specific procedures. It must be done at a prescribed time using a certain kind of "bread" and "wine." It must be served by designated leaders and always in the church building. To deviate from these forms is often



HEAVENLY TUNES & COMMON TUNICS



After the fall of Rome in 476, the old Roman dress gradually fell into disuse. Church leaders, however, stubbornly clung to the civilized Roman ways and refused to give up their garb.

Soon that old garb was accepted as proper attire for the clergy, including those who sang in choirs, and various councils insisted they be worn at the altar. By 589, most choirs were dressed in knee-length tunics with short, fitted sleeves over a long linen robe with narrow sleeves.

Choir members also wore a long, narrow scarf-like vestment, called a stole, designed from the Roman *orarium*, a handkerchief-like cloth used for wiping the mouth, face, or hands.

Over the next 400 years, choir robes were mandated throughout Europe, mostly by papal decree. Only properly robed acolytes, monks, and members of parochial schools were allowed to sing in the medieval choirs.

In northern Europe, winters were bitter and religious celebrations seemingly endless in unheated churches. Choir members' old robes wouldn't fit over their warm fur garments, so they started wearing a more ample robe with bell-like sleeves. By the 14th century, this fuller robe, called a surplice, was established throughout western Europe as the essential choir habit.

Although the Reformation had little impact on the robes (the Reformers were interested in theology, not clothing designs), the 17th century Puritans condemned choir robes as "popish rags." Puritans believed that there should be no distinctions between clergy and laity, and that church vestments and clerical robes were evil. For a short time they succeeded in purging the church of its robes.

But by the early 1800s, Puritanism had died out. Attempting to regain some of the abandoned high liturgical

traditions, the Oxford Movement reintroduced choir robes in the Church of England.

The movement soon spread to the United States, and in 1836 the first boys choir was robed. Americans, however, weren't quite ready for this renovation.

When the prince of Wales wrote to notify New York's Trinity Church that he would be attending service on October 7, 1860, everyone buzzed with excitement. It would be an occasion to celebrate with due respect. But choir robes? Should the church robe its choir as the Church of England had been doing for years?

"Yes!" some argued. Choir robes are beautiful remnants from the old liturgical traditions. "No!" others argued just as vehemently. Choir robes are nothing less than vestiges of Catholic idolatry, unbiblical inventions to discriminate between laity and clergy.

Respect for the Church of England and the prince of Wales finally won out, and the choir was vested. To minimize the awkwardness, choir members wore their robes on the Sunday before the prince arrived. As the choir sang, however, two gunshots sounded outside. Though no one was hurt, a musket ball did fall into one of the pews.

In the Episcopal Church, laymen bitterly resisted choir robes for years. At the general convention of 1868, a group of New Jersey laymen even proposed a canon: "And no Ecclesiastical vestment shall be worn on occasions of Divine Worship or Church ceremonies, by Choirs or other assistants therein."

That same year, an Ohio clergyman was asked to disband his surpliced choir. He refused and was brought to trial for having violated church doctrine and breaking his ordination vow.

Despite the resistance, robed choirs grew in popularity. By 1895, they were in such vogue that almost every big-city church choir had to advertise carefully that it was clothed in robes. ■

Today, few churches would hold a worship service without a choir dressed in the familiar ankle-length robes with bell-like sleeves. Though the early church fathers might not recognize them, these robes are really just stylized versions of the garments church people were wearing in the Roman Empire.

The early church highly valued equality in Christ. Church leaders were intolerant of divisions between rich and poor, slaves and freeborn, and clergy and laity. As late as 428, one wrote, "We should distinguish ourselves from the people by our doctrine rather than by our dress." To ensure that equality, Christians purposely dressed in the plain white tunic common to the average man-in-the-street.

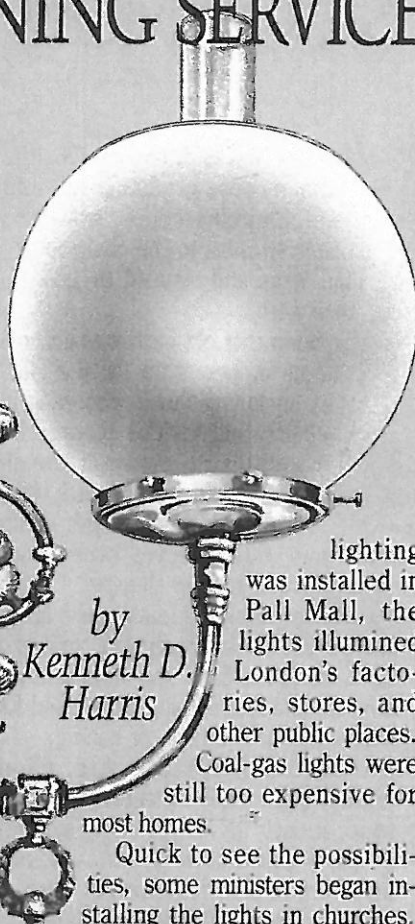
SHEDDING LIGHT ON THE SUNDAY EVENING SERVICE

Crowds continue to throng London's Bedford Baptist Chapel on Dinsworth Street every Sunday evening. Outside, children perch on their fathers' shoulders or hang from the shutters.

As the hour approaches 7 o'clock, a man walks from a door near the podium, carrying a rod with a flickering flame at its top. He proceeds up the steps onto the platform and touches the flame to the glass globes on the wall. Each immediately begins to glow with the brightness of many lanterns. As the man continues around the sanctuary, the room becomes brighter until finally it is almost like the noonday sun.

In 1792, these newly invented coal-gas lights began to pull people out of their homes during the early evening hours. At the turn of the century, Scottish engineer William Murdock, who is credited with the first development of coal-gas illumination, was commissioned to install gas lighting in London. From then until about 1820, when gas

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by
**Kenneth D.
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lighting was installed in Pall Mall, the lights illumined London's factories, stores, and other public places. Coal-gas lights were still too expensive for most homes.

Quick to see the possibilities, some ministers began installing the lights in churches. And behold, there was born the Sunday evening service.

Few religious zealots were among those first attenders. They were merely curious. Ministers rightly began preaching the simple gospel message. Sunday evening became an evangelistic outreach — a time to invite the unsaved family member or friend. ■

considered a deviation from the Word of God.

The facts are that New Testament Christians did not partake of a token meal as we do in most of our churches today. They had a supper, and the "bread" and "wine" that was used to remember the Lord's death was part of the meal. These came to be known as "love feasts" (see 1 Cor. 11:23-26; 2 Peter 2:13b). In the first church in Jerusalem, Christians remembered the Lord's death

daily as they ate together from house to house (Acts 2:42-47).

Believers changed this form because it became impossible to partake of a full meal, especially when they started meeting in church buildings rather than in homes. Consequently, they went to a token meal (a small piece of bread and a sip of juice) to remember the Lord, which most of us still call a "supper." In this sense, ever since the first century, most churches have been out of harmony with

the way New Testament Christians remembered the Lord.

Is this wrong? Certainly not. Christians changed the form of communion to be able to remember the Lord in a cultural situation that made it difficult to have a full meal together.

In a discussion of this matter with a group of students at Dallas Theological Seminary, one young woman from a different culture told of her experience with the communion meal. She said believers passed an ear of corn. Each would bite off a kernel. Then they passed a cup of juice taken from a root that was a primary drink in their culture. In this way they remembered the broken body and shed blood of the Lord Jesus.

And what about our prayer and praise patterns? In some churches, Christians stand for prayer; in others, they kneel. Bowed heads and closed eyes is the prayer posture in many churches; in other churches, believers raise their hands and look upward. All of these patterns are described or alluded to in the New Testament church, but no particular pattern is binding and absolute for everyone.

Perhaps the most emotional issue is music, because it touches the depths of our inner being and brings with it emotional memories, some of which are not spiritual but carnal. Music is also cultural. It relates to what we feel comfortable with in our particular social structures.

The Bible tells us to "speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19; see also Col. 3:16). These "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" or odes refer to the content of music. Furthermore, Paul clearly stated the purpose

of this content: to give thanks and to make melody in our hearts to the Lord.

The Bible says nothing, however, about the musical forms and structure we should use for our expressions of praise, thanksgiving, and testimony. Paul made no reference to rhythm, harmony, counterpoint, key, etc. In fact, the musical forms used by first century Christians in Middle Eastern culture would be unacceptable to most 20th century American Christians.

The reason we are often dogmatic regarding what is right and wrong in the use of music lies in our understanding of what is absolute and non-absolute, of what is cultural and supracultural, together with our biases and weak consciences. What makes some uncomfortable, primarily because of emotional memories, ministers to others.

However, even though the Bible allows freedom in form, the forms we choose must be in harmony with biblical functions. Musical forms should not work against the message we are attempting to communicate. If this happens, cultural traditions have become more important than biblical truth.

A Personal Journey

While traveling in the eastern part of the United States a couple of summers ago, I picked up a book titled *Amish Society* by John A. Hostetler. Though my own religious cultural roots did not begin for nearly three centuries after Menno Simons and Jakob Ammann launched Mennonite and Amish history, I discovered the source of many of my church's traditions.

In 1836, Samuel Froehlich

HOW WE CAME TO COME FORWARD

One church historian called it "one of the greatest verbal confusions in the history of the Christian church."

The object of his consternation? The "altar call." When and how an "altar" was verbally erected in Protestant Christianity is unknown. One of the earliest appearances of the phrase was in 1847 by a Methodist lay evangelist named Phoebe Palmer, apparently with reference to Romans 12:1,2.

The practice of calling inquirers forward in the meeting place, however — a particularly American custom — can be traced back to the open-air camp meetings held toward the end of the 18th century. Who gave the first call is unknown, but the "mourners bench" was a well-established part of the Methodist frontier revivals.

From the journal of Jesse Lee, a Methodist preacher, October 31, 1798:

"John Easter proclaimed aloud, 'I have not a doubt but God will convert a soul today.' The preachers had requested all that were under conviction to come together. Several men and women came and fell upon their knees, and

the preachers for some time kept singing and exhorting the mourners . . . till the cries of the mourners became truly awful. Then prayer was made in behalf of the mourners, and two or three found peace."

While the altar call became an indelible part of the American religious scene, it was not welcomed elsewhere. A Wesleyan conference in England

in 1807 denounced altar calls as "highly improper" and "likely to be productive of considerable mischief," despite the practice's firm roots in Methodism.

The summons forward found its perfection in the revival work of Charles Finney, who saw thousands find Christ on the "anxious seat." His carefully organized meetings climaxed in his call to the congregation.

"Without new measures it is impossible that the church should succeed in gaining the attention of the world to religion," Finney said of his bold approach.

In time, the walk to the front of an auditorium developed far beyond its original purpose of merely separating out inquirers and became identified by many as a saving act of faith. ■



HOW THE NARTHEX GOT ITS NAME

Look for more information in the narthex after the service," the pastor announced.

Narthex? I wondered. *What's that?* I was new at going to church. Churches were supposed to have pews, a pulpit, stained glass, and a bell tower, but what's a narthex?

A little investigation showed me that a narthex looked surprisingly like a lobby. Maybe it had something to do with being on the north side of the church: *north exit*? That didn't seem Presbyterian enough.

But a narthex is non-sectarian, the dictionary said: "the portico of an ancient church" or "a vestibule leading to the nave of a church — see *basilica* illustrations." I knew about St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, but that was about it. Did Bear Creek Presbyterian have a nave too?

We did. I'd even been sitting there, along with all the others who called it a sanctuary. This ancient term for where the congregation assembled originally meant "ship."

But the original meaning for the Greek word *narthex* compounded the mystery; it referred to the giant fennel plant. How did a herb that tastes like licorice get connected with church buildings? The only biblical spices I knew were mint, dill, and cumin.

Digging into *Britannica* unearthed more information about the porch and the plant, but did nothing to put the two together.

Fennel and its giant cousin, the narthex, are grown throughout the Mediterranean world, primarily for flavoring and scent. Dried stems of the narthex, which may grow to 10 feet, are sometimes used for tinder. A Greek myth claims that knowledge came to man from Olympus in the form of a burning coal in a fennel stalk — the only hint of a religious connection.

I learned that basilicas go back a lot further than St. Peter's or even the

saint himself. This style of long, rectangular building was as common throughout Roman cities as temples that looked like the Parthenon. But basilicas were secular, used for meeting halls and law courts.

After Christianity became a legal religion early in the fourth century, congregations began to outgrow the houses where they'd been meeting, and their building committees picked the basilica as the perfect design.

The broad, central aisle (nave), along with two side aisles, gave room for the congregation. At the far end, the chancel, where the judge sat, became the place for clergy and the communion table. The narthex was reserved for catechumens — converts not yet baptized.

Eventually the restriction lapsed, but the room remained. New elements became vital to church design: bell towers, stained glass, and additions called transepts that gave the floor plan a cross, or cruciform, shape. European churches were built with the altar on the east side, facing Jerusalem, so the narthex became the west entrance.

But the underlying reason for the narthex's name seemed beyond my grasp. My curiosity flickered out, only to be rekindled a few years later on a study tour to the ancient church sites in Turkey.

In Ephesus, our group explored the ruins of St. John's Basilica, built in the sixth century. With accented English, our Turkish guide, Ümit Baykal, gave a running commentary:

"This is the gate of narthex," he said.

Could Ümit know the answer?

"This was a plant which was very useful, because this people, even the Ephesians at the church settlement . . . had being used this plant."

So how were they using it in church?

"During the daytime, during the night time, they were putting some

narthex plants over the gate. They were making it burn, so they were getting an eternal fire," Ümit explained. "In this way the gate of the basilica became the gate of narthex. And that's the reason that most of the churches' entrance name became narthex."

But why did Ephesians start burning the plant day and night outside a basilica? That afternoon at the Ephesus town hall site, Ümit again gave an answer.

Burning above the building's entrance, a continual narthex fire signaled to ship captains in the harbor. "If light was on here, everything was OK," he explained. "But if light wasn't on here, that was meaning that something was wrong like a war, like malaria."

So if your church has a narthex, be sure to check that the light's on before you go inside.

ANDREW SCHEER



T R A D I T I O N S

broke from Switzerland's state Reformed Church and founded the Congregation of Evangelical Baptists (now called the Apostolic Christian Church of America). He preached in churches founded by the followers of Menno and Ammann. Many of the traditions Froehlich passed on to succeeding generations had much in common with these earlier groups.

For example, men sat on one side of the church and women on the other. And once a young person officially joined the church, dating was forbidden (marriage proposals were communicated through church leaders to the parents).

I had come to understand that many of these traditions were cultural and not biblical, but this historical journey helped me to appreciate more fully the freedom God has given us in form and structure. As a pastor involved in the church renewal movement since the early 1970s, I developed even more freedom as I understood more clearly the source of my religious traditions.

That freedom works in two directions. On the one hand, we have freedom to keep traditions that are meaningful and in harmony with biblical principles. On the other hand, understanding the cultural source of our traditions gives us freedom to give up those that are no longer relevant or out of harmony with biblical principles.

Adventure in Church Planting

When my wife and I, along with several other couples, launched the first Fellowship Bible Church in Dallas in November 1972, we determined we

would not do things the way they have been done before just because they have been done that way. But we also determined we would not change things just to be different.

We based our strategy on three perspectives:

First, we wanted to launch a church based on biblical principles — principles that we believe are absolute and supra-cultural.

Second, we wanted to learn from the past — to eliminate what has been out of harmony with biblical principles, and to use traditions that have been in harmony with biblical principles all along and are still relevant.

Third, we wanted to consider carefully our own cultural situation. Just as Jesus understood the cultural differences of the Samaritan woman and adjusted His methods accordingly, and just as Paul understood the mindset of the Gentile community and also adjusted his approach accordingly, so we wanted to bring biblical principles to bear upon Texans living in Dallas.

The result has been freedom to be creative in form and structure and yet security in being firmly grounded on those great truths that should *never* change — the absolute and enduring principles of Scripture.

For example, we've structured services so we can make multiple use of the church building. We've had a Friday night church, a Sunday morning church, a Sunday afternoon church, and a Sunday night church. In addition to building permanent facilities, we've leased warehouse space, recreational centers, school buildings, college auditoriums,

Christian school chapels, and hotel conference rooms.

We've also developed a small-group ministry that we call "mini-churches," which have replaced traditional adult Sunday school classes. We've lengthened the traditional worship service to allow more time for creative worship, praise, sharing, and teaching. Simultaneously, a learning center for children focuses on creative learning activities. We eliminated the traditional Sunday evening and Wednesday night services to make room for our small-group ministries and to implement a Sunday evening Bible institute.

Our small groups are encouraged to share a meal together in various homes and to have communion with the meal to enhance relationships with God and one another. Assigned lay pastors lead these small groups and have the freedom to baptize people in swimming pools, in lakes, or — if they like — in the church building. I've witnessed a lay pastor baptize fathers, who in turn baptized their wives and children.

Once we understand the freedom God has given us in form and structure, and at the same time we are committed to biblical absolutes, we are neither bound by traditions nor prone to ignore those that are relevant and meaningful.

This, indeed, is true freedom, and I thank God for it. I've seen this kind of freedom bring new life in Christ to many people who had determined that "traditional" religion was no longer relevant to their lives. In essence, these people have learned the difference between "churchianity" and Christianity. ■