

The Doctrine of the Prior Agenda
(Mark 7:1-8, 21-23)

Richard Bolles, author of *What Color Is Your Parachute?*, was once asked, "What stands in the way of people finding their mission?" Bolles replied:

Prior agendas! For example, my wife, Carol, is a well-known career counselor in her own right. She was meeting with a client who worked in the rubber industry – let's call him George. George told her in their first session, "I've got to get out of the rubber industry." So she gave him some homework to do before their next session. He came back the next week, and he hadn't done a lick of the homework. My wife, rich with intuition, asked him, "What will happen if you don't get out of the rubber industry?" George said, "My wife will divorce me." Carol said, "Do you want your wife to divorce you?"

He couldn't keep the smile off of his face. She knew then that he would never change his job until it had given him what he wanted: a divorce, with his wife taking the initiative – and the guilt. Based on his behavior, my wife named this "the doctrine of the prior agenda." You can't help people change or find their mission when they have a conflicting prior agenda. People

will never change until they truly want to.¹

While not a historical or theological Christian doctrine, the Doctrine of the Prior Agenda certainly applies to the church today. Steeped in rich tradition we cling to the ways of the past, often times not realizing that change is needed, and sometimes even unaware of our own prior agendas. Please pray with me.

Loving God, in our humanness we grow into our agendas that keep us from being all that you have created us to be. Through your sanctifying grace we pray that you will help us to be all that you intend for us to be in this life – to not only accept change but to innovate it for the sake of the Gospel message. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and the word proclaimed. Make my word your words as they fall upon our hearts and open up our minds. Through Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees when they noticed that some of his disciples failed to perform the Hebrew hand-washing ritual before sitting down to a meal. In the gospel lesson this morning Mark tells us that:

¹ Citation: Daniel H. Pink, "What Happened to Your Parachute?" *Fast Company* (September 1999).

“The Jews, especially the Pharisees, do not eat until they have poured water over their cupped hands, as required by their ancient traditions. Similarly, they eat nothing bought from the market unless they have immersed their hands in water. This is but one of many traditions they have clung to – such as their ceremony of washing cups, pitchers, and kettles.” [Mark 7:3-4 *NLT*]

The Pharisees want to know why the disciples don't follow the ancient Hebrew traditions. Those traditions evolved over several hundred years as Mosaic Law was interpreted by the Levite priests. Mosaic Law began quite simply, if not dramatically, with those ten commands God gave to Moses.

God had two simple purposes in giving the Ten Commandments to Moses and the Israelites. The first purpose was to govern our relationship with God. The second was to govern our relationship with each other as we seek live in community with one another.

The Ten Commandments are God's requirements for living in the kingdom. The Levites interpreted those requirements and devised more than six hundred laws to amplify them. In their arrogance, the Levites decided they knew more about the Israelites than God did. Their laws extended to things like cleanliness, purity, and dietary restrictions.

The Levite laws governed what the Israelites could eat and not eat in order to remain holy in God's sight. The laws became ingrained in the Hebrew society and evolved into complex rituals.

The rituals then evolved into traditions, some of which live on today.

By the first century, the Pharisees were charged with maintaining these ancient traditions – even in the face of a changing society. On one hand, Jesus affirmed that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. On the other hand, he made a distinction between God's simple law and the human law that had become tradition.

The gospel lesson this morning is not about cleanliness, purity or diet. It's not about what we should eat and should not eat. It's not about what ceremonies should be performed before and after we eat. The gospel lesson this morning is about breaking from tradition. Jesus' fulfills the law by challenging the human traditions that evolved from divine law – God's law. When confronted by the Pharisees for breaking from those traditions, Jesus replied:

"You hypocrites! Isaiah was talking about you when he said, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far away. Their worship is a farce, for they replace God's commands with their own man-made teachings.' For you ignore God's specific laws and substitute your own traditions." [Mark 7:6-7 *NLT*]

Tradition becomes our prior agenda – like the man in the story I told at the beginning of this message. He had no intention of changing until his real agenda was fulfilled. Sometimes our prior agendas are well-known to us – clandestine in nature. We use those agendas to resist change, to assert our own will on those around us.

Other times, our agendas are more subtle – masked by our faith. We draw conclusions that really seem more like the Pharisees of the first century Mediterranean culture. We interpret tradition as God's will for our lives, even when those traditions become outdated. Here is one example from outside the church.

Bayer Corporation has stopped putting those large cotton wads in their [small-mouthed] bottles of Genuine Bayer Aspirin. The company realized the aspirin would hold up fine without the maddening white clumps, which it had included since about 1914. "We concluded there really wasn't any reason to keep the cotton except tradition," said Chris Allen, Bayer's vice president of technical operations. "Besides, it's hard to get out."²

Longstanding traditions can often create more problems than they actually solve. In the case of Bayer Aspirin, there was a real need for putting the cotton wads in the small bottles way back in 1914. In those early days, manufacturing, packaging, and shipping was not so refined. The cotton wads protected the aspirin from damage until they were safely in the hands of consumers.

Over the years, however, as the process became more sophisticated the cotton no longer served its original purpose. The tradition became a hardship on the users of the product. Because no one questioned the tradition it continued. It probably cost Bayer Corporation additional money that could have otherwise increased profitability. And who knows how much Bayer lost in profits when people stopped using the

² Citation: Ed Rowell, from *The Tennessean* (September 12, 1999)

product because of the difficulty in removing the cotton.

Jesus broke from the tradition that had evolved from the Mosaic Law. He called the behavior of the Pharisees into question and taught his disciples to see the law in a different way. Jesus broke with tradition. If we take seriously Jesus' break from tradition in the first century, we will understand that we are called to do the same today.

Breaking from tradition doesn't mean giving up our values. We are called to constantly examine tradition and evaluate it based on our understanding of scripture and our experience of God in the world – past, present, and future. Then through our God-given ability to reason, we need to decide which traditions no longer serve God's purpose for the kingdom.

You may have figured out that I am talking about our United Methodist Quadrilateral: The Corners of Our Faith. We believe that the living core of Christian faith is revealed to us in *scripture*, illuminated by *tradition*, given life by our personal *experience* of God in the world, and confirmed by *reason*. This is our Quadrilateral – *scripture, tradition, experience, and reason!*

The Quadrilateral helps us to bring our prior agendas to the surface. Only when we understand and confront our agendas can we move forward and feel more comfortable with change. In the New Millennium the institutional church must shed its prior agendas and break from tradition – just as Jesus did two thousand years ago.

Breaking from tradition can allow us to see the church in new and innovative ways. This will be essential for the institutional church if it is to thrive into the 21st century. One tradition that is beginning to be challenged is the

ideology that the church is a building. Church growth professionals tell us that the church of the future will meet in places like rented store fronts, coffee shops, and other secular venues. This is what our bishop refers to as “new faith communities.”

In the future, new churches will not necessarily be encumbered by property and buildings. This break from tradition will free up hundreds of millions of dollars for mission – money that would otherwise be poured into to expensive bricks and mortar and burdensome mortgages.

Breaking with tradition requires that we take seriously the Doctrine of Prior Agendas. People will always resist change. It’s our human condition – our human nature. But we must not let that resistance stand in the way of exposing our own prior agendas. The institutional church will not thrive in the future until those prior agendas are brought to the surface and honestly dealt with.

As we prepare to gather as a church family next Saturday to talk about our future, I encourage you all to take time to reflect on your prior agendas. In what ways do you need to become more open to breaking with some of your traditions? In what ways might you see yourself holding on to outdated traditions that repel rather than attract the marginally churched and unchurched people in our own community? Leave your prior agendas at home when you come next Saturday. Be open to God’s presence among us and allow the Holy Spirit to work within each of us individually and together as we begin our journey out of the wilderness.

Jesus was a radical. He was all about tearing down barriers – the walls built up by tradition and sustained by the

Doctrine of the Prior Agenda. Jesus was all about helping others to see their prior agendas – the practices that hold back advancing the one ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus calls to us today to expose our own prejudices and prior agendas so that the church can move forward into the future and thrive – not just survive! Jesus is calling us to look forward to the future and take seriously the Doctrine of the Prior Agenda.