

Keeping Up with the Times

by Sebastian R Fama

I have been told the Church does not keep up with the times. To which I respond; Should the Church keep up with the times? As Christians we follow Jesus. And Jesus is God. And God is the source of all truth. Furthermore: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). God does not change; truth does not change. People and situations change. The truth may be applied to these new situations. But the truth can never contradict itself.

No one likes to be seen as odd. Consequently, following the crowd can seem like the right thing to do. But the worlds standards differ from God's standards. That is why He calls us to: "be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). Yes, we live in the world, but we should never be led by it. Rather we should be a light to it (Matthew 5:14-16). Or, as the apostle John said:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever (1 John 2:15-17).

The same God who is the author of all truth, established a Church and ordained that it would operate in a certain way. It was God who created man. And it is God who is to be worshipped and obeyed. We should never reduce our Creator to some advisor who presents suggestions, some of which are good, and others not so good. When we reject anything ordained by God, we make ourselves His equal.

Jesus promised to guide and protect His Church:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; **and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.**" (Matthew 28:18-20).

Thus, Church teachings come from a perfect God. The ever-changing beliefs of the world come from flawed human beings. But some may protest: "We do not challenge Jesus. We are only opposed to the 'man-made rules.'" Many of the teachings that are said to be man-made, are teachings that come directly from Jesus. But let us set that aside for a moment. There are some Church teachings that Jesus does not mention specifically. Can we disregard them by referring to them as "man-made"? Certainly, an omnipotent God would have anticipated such a question. Logically then, His promise to safeguard the Church would need to take that into account. And it does. At the Last Supper, He said the following to His apostles:

I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, **He will guide you into all truth**; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for **He will take what is mine and declare it to you** (John 16:12-15).

So, according to Jesus, He did not tell them everything. He says there is more to come. And the Holy Spirit will guide them into all truth. Jesus taught with authority, His apostles taught with authority, and it stands to reason that their successors would also need to teach with authority. Scripture is clear; Jesus gave His Church the power to legislate: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). Jesus also said, if you reject the Church, you reject Him: "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects the one who sent me" (Luke 10:16).

Regardless of the importance you place on any one of the issues addressed by the so called "man-made rules," there is a larger issue at play here. And that is the issue of obedience. Remember that Adam and Eve were thrown

out of the garden for eating a piece of fruit. The Gospel of John tells us: "He who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him" (John 3:36). The teachings or disciplines in question may be "man-made," but they are authorized and enforced by God. Also, no Church teaching is arbitrary. Upon close examination we find that they all work for our benefit.

We know that God is the source of all truth. We also know that He communicates those truths through His Church. But what does the world have to offer? When we say, "keeping up with the times," we are usually talking about following societal trends. Not surprisingly, societal trends tend to be more permissive than the mandates from God. Trend setters are often motivated by self-interest as opposed to the common good.

The apostle Paul refers to worldly wisdom as "folly" (1 Corinthians 3:18). Proverbs 14:12 tells us: "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death." James brings the point home even more forcefully: "Unfaithful creatures! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

The Bible warns us about adopting human traditions:

See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness of life in Him, who is the head of all rule and authority (Colossians 2:8-10).

Human judgement is famously unreliable. In the 1930's, the Nazis enjoyed widespread support in Germany. Did that make Nazism a good thing? In the 18th and 19th centuries, slavery was generally accepted as the norm by a majority of the American south. Did that make slavery a good thing? I am not comparing anyone to Nazis or slave owners. The point here is, if human beings can be misled on such a grand scale, how much more can they be misled on issues that are not so obvious.

Jesus specifically warns us not to follow the crowd. In Matthew 7:13-14 He says: "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few." If you follow societal trends there is a good chance you are on the broad road that leads to destruction.

Bad habits can be hard to break. Consequently, we may choose to ignore God. We seek ways to rationalize our behavior. Finding support from like-minded people puts us at ease. But Christians are called to a higher standard. In Romans 7:21-25 Paul writes of his own struggle and reveals the solution to all our struggles:

So, I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Elsewhere he says: "I can do all things through Him [Jesus] who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Once we die to self and allow Jesus to work in us, we become a "new creation," the "old has passed away" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

God can create anything that can be created. One thing He cannot create is love. For love to be genuine it must be freely given. Thus, we have been given free will. Do we love God? Do we want to spend eternity with Him? How we live our lives, is how we answer those questions.

When working with volatile chemicals, certain protocols must be observed. Every detail of the safety procedures must be adhered to. Failure to do so can result in physical death. Likewise, when working out our salvation, every command of God must be adhered to. Failure to do so can result in spiritual death. If we are careful with that which is temporary, how much more should we be careful with that which is eternal?

As we have already noted, Jesus, (God) promised to guide and protect His Church. And we know that God keeps His promises. To remove all doubt, He said as much in Isaiah 55:11: "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I sent it." Therefore, to say the Church should keep up with the times, is to argue that God should obey men. And of course, that would be wrong.