

Haley Waldman has celiac sprue disease, a rare genetic disorder that makes her intolerant of gluten, a protein found in wheat and other grains. Gluten damages 8-year-old Haley's digestive tract and could eventually lead to bone disorders or cancer.

There is no cure for celiac sprue disease, but the trick to living with it—avoiding gluten—is simple, if not easy.

Unless, like Haley's family, you are Roman Catholic. Catholic doctrine states that official communion wafers must contain unleavened wheat. When Haley's mother requested a rice wafer substitute for Haley's first communion, her priest refused.

A priest at a nearby parish offered to perform Haley's communion service with a gluten-free host, but was told afterwards by his diocese that the church could not validate Haley's communion.

"I struggled with telling her that the sacrament did not happen," said Elizabeth Pelly-Waldman, Haley's mother, in an Associated Press interview.¹ "She lives in a world of rules. She says 'Mommy, do we want to break a rule? Are we breaking a rule?'"

Pelly-Waldman is appealing the diocese ruling to a Vatican cardinal, saying the church's insistence on wheat in communion host and alcoholic wine rather than grape juice is a tradition that should not be allowed to hinder Catholics from practicing their faith.

Is it arrogant for the Catholic church to declare wheat and alcohol as the *sine qua non* of real communion? Or is it unfair for Pelly-Waldman to demand the church ignore its own doctrine for her daughter's convenience?

Wars and Rumors of Wars

Since the earliest days of the church, believers have argued over many issues concerning the proper way to conduct corporate worship, including:

WORSHIP WARS

Is anything too small for the church to fight over?

By Greg Hartman

- **The Lord's Supper:** How often should it be observed: At every service, or at some other interval? Must the wine be alcoholic, or is grape juice okay? Does it matter what kind of bread is used? Who should be allowed to partake? Are the elements symbolic, literal or some combination of the two? As noted above, the Roman Catholic church (among others) has strictly codified these issues; other denominations and churches have other approaches or contend that many of these issues don't really matter.

- **Music:** What instruments are appropriate? What style of music is most pleasing to God: Contemporary praise choruses, traditional hymns or a mixture? Should instrumental music of any kind be allowed? Is music an essential part of worship in the first place?

- **Worship days:** Is there an official day to conduct corporate worship? A few insist Saturday is the Lord's Day; some contend it must be Sunday in honor of Christ's resurrection. Still others contend the day of worship doesn't matter at all.

- **Liturgy:** Should the order of service be rigidly defined, from congregant movements to responsive readings and rote recitation of prayer? Some believers advocate for such an approach.² Others prefer less structure and more spontaneous congregant participation.

- **Baptism:** Even without arguing whether baptism is necessary for salvation, there's still plenty to squabble about: Who should be baptized—adults or infants? Sprinkling or immersion? Must the baptism be performed "In the name of Jesus," or is there no formula?

And these are just a few of the mainstream issues having to do with corporate worship. Christians snipe at one another over the role of women in the church;³ whether to use pews or chairs; the shape and architectural style of a sanctuary; whether to have a building at all or meet in homes; how and when to conduct offerings; the length of the service and thousands of

other details. The squabbling within individual churches can be bad enough; the fighting between believers from different denominations or church traditions can get so clamorous it's amazing anyone ever hears the gospel.

In Spirit and in Truth

These arguments indicate that, perhaps unconsciously, many of us believe God has ordained specific worship methods and practices, and some churches—our own, most likely—have a better grasp of them than others.

When Jesus spoke with the woman at the well in Sychar (John 4:5-26), he confronted just these sorts of issues: Did God favor the Jews over the Samaritans? Should God be worshiped on Mount Gerazim or in Jerusalem? Brushing these issues aside, Jesus declared neither question mattered anymore, because “God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). The *location* and *manner* of worship are irrelevant—the Pentateuch's staggering complex rituals, special buildings, priestly clothing and implements, rote recitations, weekly and annual days of worship and sacrifices have all been set aside. Faith in Christ and a sincere worshiper's heart are all that's necessary.

Prime Ingredients

Looking for a New Testament formula for a corporate worship service is, therefore, an exercise in frustration. It is a given that Christians should meet for fellowship in the first place (Acts 2:42-44; Hebrews 10:25). Jesus himself exhorted his followers to observe the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19); beyond that, instructions on which elements to include or how to conduct worship are maddeningly vague—or nonexistent:

- **The Lord's Supper:** Paul scolded the Corinthians for partaking of communion in an “unworthy manner”—specifically, that some went ahead without waiting for the rest; that some tried to make the sacrament a full meal rather than eating at home, leaving nothing for others; and that some even became intoxicated (1 Corinthians 11:20-34).

Such warnings might be unnecessary today, but Paul's last warning is not: That we take care to examine ourselves before participating (vv. 28-29). Beyond this, he offers no other guidelines, leaving churches completely free to choose how often to offer the Lord's Supper, how to organize distribution of the elements or just what elements to distribute in the first place.

- **Music:** Praising God in song has always been a natural part of corporate worship (Colossians 3:16). But the Bible is silent on the question of musical styles or instruments, saying only that we should sing and make music in our hearts to the Lord, giving thanks for everything (Ephesians 5:19-20). Churches are free to choose in this area as well.



- **Worship days:** There are no set times or places for worship in the New Testament. The church initially met daily (Acts 2:46); they gathered at all hours of the day and night in the courts of the temple, in one another's homes, in public places—sometimes in jail.

Paul scolded the Galatians for attempting to require the observation of special days (Galatians 4:10); yet he also exhorted the Romans to respect one another's personal convictions on the issue (Romans 14:5). Clearly we are free to follow our consciences, but not to press our convictions on others.

- **Liturgy:** The New Testament is silent on the structure of corporate worship, much less whether liturgy was employed. Some congregations' worship undoubtedly reflected the regimented, liturgical nature of Temple or synagogue services;⁴ others clearly preferred more democratic group participation (1 Corinthians 14:26). At times, Paul took the floor exclusively or commanded that his letters be read to a congregation (Acts 20:7-9; Colossians 4:16), but he was equally comfortable with the Corinthians' unstructured style. The only guidelines he offered stress the need for everyone to recognize a central authority in the congregation to judge others' contributions and keep worship from descending into chaos (1 Corinthians 14:32, 40).

- **Baptism:** Baptism seems to have been done on an ad hoc basis in the early church; converts and baptists merely headed for the nearest body of water (John 3:23; Acts 8:36). Unlike our arguments over whether to baptize in the name of the Lord Jesus today, the controversy of the day seemed to be over just who



EVERY CHURCH HAS LITURGY

One of my favorite instructors at Multnomah Bible College and Biblical Seminary was Rex Koivisto. Dr. Koivisto, author of *One Lord, One Faith*, a seminal textbook on ecumenism, had an amusing way of dealing with doctrinal rigidity in discussions of worship.

One issue that often arose in the classroom was liturgical vs. nonliturgical services. “Anyone here think liturgy hinders the Holy Spirit from moving freely?” Dr. Koivisto asked. A few hands shot up. “Our services are spontaneous,” one student said. “We can’t dictate to the Holy Spirit how and when to move.”

“Your services are completely unstructured and spontaneous?” The student nodded. “What time do services start?”

“Ten a.m.,” the student replied. There were a few chuckles, but not everyone caught the irony, so Dr. Koivisto pressed on.

“Every church has liturgy; most are just too lazy to write it down,” he said. “If you don’t believe me, go to a spontaneous, nonliturgical church and suggest a change in the order of service.” In *One Lord, One Faith*, Koivisto contends that many Protestant denominations have misinterpreted such passages as Mark 7:10-13 as a call to jettison all tradition.¹ But in this passage, Jesus scolds the Pharisees not for observing tradition, but for allowing tradition to nullify God’s Word. We can see, in fact, that Jesus himself supported some extrabiblical Jewish traditions, such as the synagogue system or the Feast of Dedication.²

In short, there is nothing inherently wrong with following traditions in worship services. Only unbiblical or heretical tradition is bad; grace affirming, Christ-centered tradition can and should be embraced.

Most Protestant churches in the U.S. are suspicious of tradition without realizing they are as bound to it as any liturgical church. As church historian George Marsden noted, the most popular tradition in American churches is the denial of the authority of traditions!³

It is, of course, possible to become so bound by tradition that it takes on the same authority as the Word of God. But equally risky, Koivisto argues, is the attempt to reject all tradition out of hand, when in fact it is impossible not to observe tradition in worship.

The question is not really “Do I believe in tradition?” but, “Which tradition will I follow?” Every evangelical subculture is laden with traditions peculiar to its own history.⁴

Complete rejection of tradition is an impossibility. Any biblicist who will carefully examine his own denomination will find certain characteristics that fail to rally explicit New Testament support.⁵

The issue can no longer be stated as “Scripture vs. tradition.” This is a wrong way of posing the problem that can only produce wrong answers. The real problem is to discover a proper relationship between Scripture and tradition. This means that the question for many evangelical Protestants is not “How can we get rid of tradition?” or “How can we set Scripture against tradition?” It is rather, “How can we employ tradition creatively within a Protestant context?”⁶

¹ Rex Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993), pp. 129-130.

² *Op. cit.*, pp. 140-141.

³ George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 81.

⁴ Robert Webber, *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 125-126.

⁵ Bruce Shelley, *By What Authority? The Standards of Authority in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 149.

⁶ Robert McAfee Brown, “Tradition as a Protestant Problem,” *Theology Today* 17 (1961), p. 443.

did the baptizing (1 Corinthians 1:13-16). Paul tartly dismisses the controversy by giving thanks he had only performed two baptisms.

And as with other elements of worship, there seems to be no consistent pattern for baptisms. Baptisms are performed in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19); in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38); and into the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 8:16). The only consistent element is water, and even that is declared purely symbolic (1 Peter 3:21). Immersion, sprinkling, ritual phrasing—we are clearly free to choose our methods.

Celebrate Diversity

Some ecumenists would insist that the church universal homogenize its services, removing all distinctions in practice. Besides being wildly impractical, this goal also conflicts with Scripture, which counsels us to respect our consciences in such matters (Romans 14:1-14).

Without bleaching the color from the rich tapestry of the church, how can we enjoy the Body’s diversity while celebrating its unity? Here are a few tips:

- **Draw a large circle of orthodoxy:** Those with strong convictions about specific worship practices are free to pursue them. But if the Bible is silent on an issue, it behooves us to be silent as well. After his exhaustive discussion of worship practices with the Corinthians, Paul’s list of “first importance” (1 Corinthians 15:3-8) is notable for what it excludes—namely, every single worship controversy discussed earlier in his letter! Save your energy for the important fights, Paul says; otherwise, enjoy your freedom.

- **Embrace tradition:** Evangelicals tend to welcome tradition about as warmly as doctors welcome cancer. That’s too bad, because eradicating tradition is not just unwise—it’s impossible. We would do far better to carefully define the difference between our religious traditions and God’s commands (Mark 7:9), then simply enjoy them the way we enjoy family traditions (see “Every Church Has Liturgy”).

• **Pleasure without guilt:** A frequent concern expressed about North American Christians is that we attend church in pursuit of a pleasing experience, not to please God.⁵ If worship is the Christian's duty, does this mean we must not enjoy it?

Paul states reasons beyond pleasing God for Christians to gather in corporate worship: "When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church" (1 Corinthians 14:26).

As with gluttony or immorality, any physical pleasure can become bondage. Yet there need be no shame in simply enjoying a worship service's music or preaching, the fellowship with other believers or the traditions of the service itself.

Imperfect Gifts

For Old Testament believers, God could, to put it bluntly, be difficult to live with: Touch Mount Horeb—and die. See the Ark of the Covenant—and die. Violate the Sabbath—die. Enter the Temple without permission—die.

God has not changed; he is as holy today as the God the Israelites dared not approach. Yet one great mystery of the Atonement of Christ is that we are now the Temple. In some way beyond human understanding, the Holy Spirit can

live in our imperfect hearts without destroying us. Neither must we journey to Jerusalem to meet our Savior; Jesus promises to be with us when we simply gather in his name (Matthew 18:20).

Jesus once asked if any father whose son asked for food would give him a snake or a stone (Matthew 7:9-11). To paraphrase, would any father punish a child who gave him a handmade Father's Day card with a misspelled word or a sloppily wrapped birthday gift?

If we, being evil, know how to accept imperfect gifts from our children, why do we suppose our heavenly Father is so hard to please in worship?

Jesus' blood has given us the ability to approach the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). Let's enjoy that privilege without bickering on the way. □

¹ FOXNews.com, "Communion for Sick Girl Declared Invalid," Aug. 19, 2004. <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,129477,00.html>

² C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm* (Glasgow: Collins & Sons), p. 6.

³ Entire books have been written on this subject, so I cannot hope to give it a fair hearing in this brief article.

⁴ Bernhard Lang, *Sacred Games: A History of Christian Worship* (London: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 139.

⁵ Michael D. Warren, ed. *Experience God in Worship* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2000), p. 15, cf. Barna Research Group, Ltd., 1997 (www.barna.org).

Greg Hartman and his wife, Sarah, were once compelled to observe the Lord's Supper using french fries and Diet Pepsi. As near as they could tell, God did not mind.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE HYMN?



...or worship song? What's your least favorite hymn or worship song? Send us your opinion, and we'll publish the results of this survey in the next issue of *Plain Truth* magazine:

To start your mind working, here's a list of the top 10 hymns from one popular website devoted to the subject of worship music.

1. Amazing Grace
2. Great is Thy Faithfulness
3. How Great Thou Art
4. All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name
5. What a Friend We Have in Jesus
6. O God Our Help in Ages Past
7. All Creatures of our God and King
8. The Church's One Foundation
9. The Solid Rock
10. Blessed Assurance

Don't agree? Let us know! Send us your favorite and least favorite. E-mail us at managing.editor@ptm.org or mail us at Favorite Hymns Managing Editor *Plain Truth* magazine Pasadena, California 91129



It seems there was a feud between the Pastor and the Choir Director. The first hint of trouble came when the Pastor preached on "dedicating yourselves to service," and the Choir Director chose to follow the message with "I Shall Not Be Moved."

Trying to believe it was a coincidence, the Pastor put the incident behind him. The next Sunday he preached on "giving." Afterwards, the choir squirmed as the director led them in "Jesus Paid It All."

By this time, the Pastor was losing his temper. Sunday morning attendance swelled as the tension between the two built. A large crowd showed up the next week to hear the Pastor's sermon on "The Sins of Gossiping." Would you believe the Choir Director selected "I Love to Tell the Story"?

There was no turning back. The following Sunday the Pastor told the congregation that unless something changed, he was considering resignation. The entire church gasped when the Choir Director led them in "Why Not Tonight?"

Truthfully, no one was surprised when the Pastor resigned a week later, explaining that Jesus had led him there, and Jesus was leading him away. The Choir Director could not resist "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."