

The Gospel According to Luke

“Customs Check” Chapter 1:57-80

Introduction

The occasion of a circumcision was regarded as a festive event for the entire Jewish community. There were certain customs that were part of the ceremony of circumcision:

1. First, godparents were chosen.
2. As the ceremony began, the godmother would carry the eight-day old infant from his mother's room to the room in which the circumcision would take place and give him to the child's father.
3. The father handed him to the person (hopefully!) trained to perform circumcisions, called the *mohel* (pronounced moyel).
4. The mohel placed the child upon a chair and proclaimed, "*this is the chair of Elijah, may he be remembered for good.*"
5. He then lifted up the child, placed him upon a cushion in the lap of the godfather, and, after reciting appropriate blessings, the procedure was performed.
6. The father also recited a blessing to God, saying “[God] *has sanctified us by his commandments and commanded us to enter our sons into the covenant of Abraham.*”
7. The mohel then recited a prayer in the course of which a name was bestowed on the child.
8. Special hymns were sung, and blessings for the parents, the child, and the mohel, as well as for the coming of the Messiah.

All or some of these customs had been performed over-and-over again in Jewish households for thousands of years - every time a baby boy was circumcised. Nothing extraordinary ever happened... *Until Zacharias and Elizabeth brought their baby boy to be circumcised.* All of a sudden the customs that had been observed for centuries took on their real power:

1. There, on what the Jews called ‘the chair of Elijah,’ was the baby who fulfilled its symbolism, whom the angel Gabriel had described as coming “in the spirit and power of Elijah.”
2. As Zacharias’ tongue was loosed to pronounce the usual blessing for the coming of the Messiah, he said something unusual and unlike any previous blessing ever spoken at a circumcision. He spoke prophetically to let the people know the coming of the Messiah was imminent and in their lifetime.

Never had there been such a circumcision ceremony! It’s an understatement to say that “fear” came upon the people. Of course they “all marvelled” at what had occurred, and “discussed” the events “throughout all the hill country of Judea.”

Let’s think about ourselves for a moment. Churches – **all Churches** - have customs and ceremonies. Even those who are trying to become more ‘contemporary’ do so by instituting new customs and ceremonies. We want people to go away *fearing* God, *marveling* and *discussing* the things that occurred with their families and friends.

We can learn some things about the power or powerlessness of our customs as we search through these verses. We’ll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 Church Customs Lose Their Power When You Follow Them To The Letter, and #2 Church Customs Loose Their Power When You Are Filled With The Spirit.

#1 Church Customs Lose Their Power When You Follow Them To The Letter (v57-63)

The family and friends of Zacharias and Elizabeth should have been anticipating something special at the circumcision of their son:

1. The angel Gabriel had appeared to Zacharias to announce his birth.
2. Elizabeth had been barren and was past the age at which she could expect to become pregnant; yet pregnant she had become, just as predicted.
3. Zacharias had been struck deaf and dumb and had not uttered a word for nine months.

Nevertheless we will see that the people gathered together for the circumcision ceremony were crippled by their customs.

Luke 1:57 Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son.

Luke 1:58 When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her.

Elizabeth's pregnancy and delivery were called a "great mercy." I'd like to introduce you to a phrase credited to C. S. Lewis. He spoke of *severe mercies*. Elizabeth provides a good example. Her whole life she had been barren and reproached for it, as if God were judging her and her husband by withholding children. Then she had gotten pregnant and, with all the joy it brought, it was also accompanied by the difficulties of having a baby and raising a child in your old age. These things were severe, but a mercy nonetheless – God's severe mercy in Elizabeth's life. They were cause for rejoicing but had come at a cost.

Luke 1:59 So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias.

Circumcision on the eighth day goes back to God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17:12). Abraham was to be the father of a multitude of descendants and founder of a line of kings. Circumcision was the outward sign of the covenant. Even in the Old Testament the outward custom spoke of an inward reality: The circumcision of the heart, the cutting-away of your old, fleshly nature to enjoy a spiritual relationship with God.

Baby boys weren't officially named until their circumcision ceremony. Everyone assumed he would be named after his father; it was the custom. The text says, "they would have called him by the name of his father..." This is pretty strong language. It means *they were for calling him*, indicating some were perhaps already calling him Zacharias, assuming it would be his name.

Family and friends can be awfully pushy and forward when it comes to ceremonies and customs! Weddings... baptisms... Almost any ceremony is surrounded by controversy in your family or among your friends.

Luke 1:60 His mother answered and said, "No; he shall be called John."

Luke 1:61 But they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name."

How rude! What I want you to notice is that they rejected her name based upon their usual custom. Parents had been naming their firstborn sons after the father, or another close relative, for centuries. It's the way things were always done.

This is the problem posed by customs and ceremonies. Just because we've always done it a certain way doesn't make it right.

The partyers at the circumcision decided to go over Elizabeth's head:

Luke 1:62 So they made signs to his father - what he would have him called.

Luke 1:63 And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, "His name is John." So they all marveled.

Zacharias had been deaf and dumb since his talk with Gabriel. The crowd signed to him and then waited for him to put the child's name into writing. The letters Zacharias would scratch onto the surface of that wax tablet would settle the matter once-and-for-all.

Those letters had the potential to kill that ceremony. All Zacharias had to do was write what everyone expected, write his own name, and all the power and symbolism would have been for nothing. To his spiritual credit Zacharias went against custom and wrote down "John" in obedience to what he had been told nine months earlier.

Churches can kill their ceremonies and services by appealing to the 'letters' that were written down decades or centuries earlier. Just because something 'worked' in the past doesn't mean it must continue. Our customs and traditions can lose their power.

Churches recognize the problem but they don't always realize the solution. For a solution they usually try to become more contemporary. They try one of two things:

1. Either they try adding a 'contemporary service' in addition to their customary service.

2. Or they borrow contemporary themes from the surrounding secular culture.

Rather than spend time explaining why neither of those approaches really works, let me tell you the real solution. ***You are the solution!*** You need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. It's not what is happening around you, but what is going on within you, that looses God's power in and through the Church.

#2 Church Customs Loose Their Power When You Are Filled With The Spirit (v64-80)

Zacharias' obedience loosed his tongue and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. The combination of his obedience and God's filling transformed the customary ceremony into an empowered moment.

Luke 1:64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue *loosed*, and he spoke, praising God.

Luke 1:65 Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea.

Luke 1:66 And all those who heard *them* kept *them* in their hearts, saying, "What kind of child will this be?" And the hand of the Lord was with him.

The reaction to Zacharias's obedience and God's filling was reverential "**fear**" and awe; ongoing spiritual dialog and discussion; and personal meditation on the plan and purposes of God. *Their reaction was the reaction you hope to get from every Church service!*

Just because something is customary doesn't make it wrong; just because it is more contemporary doesn't make it right. You don't simply upgrade the program and think you've accomplished something. It's not the outward ritual that is ultimately the focus; it's the inward relationship – your personal relationship with God.

Zacharias sang an inspired hymn filled with prophecy. It was also filled with the Old Testament: There are at least thirty-three references to Old Testament verses. It's a good example for us that what is old can still have meaning and power.

The song of Zacharias, called *The Benedictus*, breaks into three themes. First he sung about the covenant God had made with David:

Luke 1:67 Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:

Luke 1:68 "Blessed *is* the Lord God of Israel,

For He has visited and redeemed His people,

Luke 1:69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us

In the house of His servant David,

Luke 1:70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets,

Who *have been* since the world began,

Luke 1:71 That we should be saved from our enemies

And from the hand of all who hate us,

King David lived in a great palace. From its windows he looked out upon the Tabernacle within which the glory of God dwelt. He desired to build a house for God. In typical gracious fashion, God told Him that He would instead build David a spiritual house! He promised him that through his descendants the Messiah of Israel would come and rule a kingdom forever. Jesus **is** that son of David Who rules and will rule forever.

Next Zacharias sung about God's covenant with Abraham:

Luke 1:72 To perform the mercy *promised* to our fathers

And to remember His holy covenant,

Luke 1:73 The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:

Luke 1:74 To grant us that we,

Being delivered from the hand of our enemies,

Might serve Him without fear,

Luke 1:75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.

God promised Abraham He would make of him a great nation, a people as numerous as the stars of the heavens and the sand on the seashore. He promised him he would be the father of a people who would bless the whole earth. They would live in peace and find purpose and meaning in their service to God.

Israel is that people who will be reestablished in their land to bless all nations of the earth in the yet future time the Bible describes as the Millennial Kingdom.

Zacharias' last theme brought everything together. The Son promised to King David, Who would fulfill all God promised Abraham, was to be introduced in their lifetime by the baby boy being circumcised:

Luke 1:76 "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;

For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,

Luke 1:77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people

By the remission of their sins,

Luke 1:78 Through the tender mercy of our God,

With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;

Luke 1:79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,

To guide our feet into the way of peace."

Zacharias quoted from the Old Testament prophet Malachi. In the closing verses of Malachi you read about the prophet Elijah coming to prepare God's people to receive the Savior, called "the Dayspring from on high" because His coming would bring light into the spiritual darkness of the world.

The Jews were really into Elijah:

1. At their Passover Meals a place was always set for Elijah and a door left open for him to enter and eat.
2. Jews sang of Elijah at the end of the Sabbath, singing "speedily, in our days...along with the Messiah, son of David, to redeem us."
3. And, as I mentioned earlier, the chair upon which the eight-day old infant was placed just before he was circumcised was called 'the chair of Elijah.'

Elijah is connected with circumcision because of a sentence in his prayer in First Kings 19.10. His words, "for the children of Israel have forsaken your covenant," were understood by the rabbis to mean that the Israelites had abandoned the rite of circumcision. Elijah was regarded as the patron of circumcision, and it is said that his spirit was present at all circumcisions.

The Jews were expecting Elijah to come. The angel Gabriel declared that Zacharias' son, John, would come "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). Jesus would say of John, "if you will receive it, [he] is Elijah who is to come" (Matthew 11:14 MKJV).

Luke 1:80 So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.

We earlier learned that John was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb; he never took a sip of alcohol (Luke 1:15). He "grew and become strong in spirit" by living out "in the deserts."

Filled with the Holy Spirit; living a disciplined life focused on God; separated from the things of the world; living simply; spending significant time alone with God.

It's a profile of the person who wants to loose God's power through their life. It can be your profile.

Conclusion

Every custom, every ceremony, will speak to people to the extent you are obedient and filled with the Holy Spirit.

It's not a matter of rejecting custom because it's old or respecting what is contemporary because it's new.

It's a matter of your personal consecration. It's not the program God is interested in; it's the person.