

Franklin Ohlinger, "How Far Should Christians be Required to Abandon Native Customs," Report of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China (Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1890), 603-609.

transcribed by Sung-Deuk Oak

Nothing arrests our attention and invites attack sooner than the manners and customs of a people. This, it is safe to say, is due chiefly to the religious significance of those that differ most materially from our own. Every religion has its citadel and sentinels in the customs of its devotees. These may guard and pronounce a living creed or point to a neglected shrine. Our habits, says Uhlborn, stick closer than our creed. They are often the pall-bearers of our religion and linger to demand at least a decent burial for our faith. The German's call for "bad weather" is incense to his former deity his recollection of a religious rite in the same breath, reveals a newer creed. In the names we give to the days of the week we all bow to the perennial vitality of religious customs. This in itself has a tendency to stimulate opposition to them. The sturdy oak invites the axe of the aged statesman (Gladstone), while an acre of mushrooms cannot tempt the wooden sword of our four-year-old. <603/4>

Then there is the desire to do something that will tell, and to do it early. There need be no unworthy motive at the bottom of this desire. To change, improve or abolish a single religious or social custom is sufficient to immortalize a man. The Emperor Kanghi tried to abolish foot-binding and failed. The good he tried to do makes of the meanest peasant who emulates him a nobleman. No one can fail to see. Almost the moment he lands on these Asiatic shores the urgent need of changing or abolishing the

customs that hamper, torment and debase these heathen peoples. The missionary who can remain unmoved by the cruelty and wickedness of these customs has lost his divine call to the work, if he ever had one; he who can assume a neutral attitude and be content to wait until others have brought about a change for the better, is simply missionary driftwood. But missionaries, as a class, are not much inclined to the driftwood category; they are the true sons of those who have ever been accused of turning the world upside down, and still consider it as efficient answer to tell their accusers that the world is awfully downside up. Yet there may be a zeal without knowledge. The spirit of wholesale condemnation may get the upper hand here and there and work incalculable mischief. Our converts and heathen neighbors will not fail to discover whether it is this spirit or the spirit of Him who went about doing good, that moves us. They are wonderfully amenable to instruction, and even to "rules," as long as we can make them feel that we love them.

Taking for granted that we have this desire to do good to our fellow-men, there are a few things it is always well to bear in mind when dealing with the customs of a people.

(1) We ought to bear in mind that the only means of getting people to abstain from at least some of their custom, is to persuade them of something better. "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not" do not come with much effectiveness from the lips of man.

(2) It is well to bear in mind that many of the customs that invite our serious attention are not only the expression, but the teachers and guardians of the civilization of these nations. Should they yield prematurely, barbarism, and not Christianity, would, at least for a short period, be the result. Heine says the duration of religions has ever been dependent on human need for them. The same is undoubtedly true of many

customs, especially of the religions ones. It is well that they hold their own until positively crowded aside. It is well that the stars shine until the sun bids them retire.

(3) It will also be desirable to remember that our own customs are not in every respect what they ought to be. While we pity the Chinese lovers because custom does not allow them a proper courtship, we are obliged to confess that in our own lands many seem to like our custom of courtship simply because they can abuse it. The custom that shuts the door on the male physician in heathen lands is but a little remove from the custom that <604/5> until recently has persisted in telling the trembling sufferer that the only one sufficiently educated and skilled to deal with her case was a man, a stranger, a debauchee perchance. How long has Western—of course I cannot say Christian--custom thus trampled upon woman's modesty, and even now ventures to sneer at the woman who knows as much of the human body and its ailments as her brothers? It will moderate our zeal to remember that we owe it largely to the cruelly one-sided custom that provides a doctor for the man only, that we are at last on the way toward that golden mean which gives every one the choice between a male and a female doctor. It will give our zeal a healthy tone to think of the drinking customs we have been unable,— I had almost said, unwilling—to abolish; of the tobacco custom that befouls the very air we breathe; of that custom which is as much more cruel than foot-binding as a stab at the heart is more villainous than breaking the legs of a victim. Women's feet are not the only victims of the cruel bandage.

(4) Finally, let us bear in mind that these civilized though heathen nations have some good customs; others, though strange to us, that are in themselves innocent, and again many, though at first sight utterly wrong, that are nevertheless a necessity, or appear, on closer study, to be the lesser of two evils. I quote from an eminent authority:

“The fortress of time-honored customs and supernatural beliefs in which the soul of the heathen is, as it were, entrenched, must be explored and studied; if any atom of adamantine truth has survived, it must be respected, and the assault against ignorance and falsehood must be made by the united forces of wisdom and truth.” These considerations will check that ardor which would drive roughshod over anything that has no place in our own code.

But let us be convinced in our, own minds, and then lay down the line that is to constitute the boundary between church member and outsider, in the spirit of fearless candor. We are safe in requiring of the native Christians that they wholly abandon:--

1st. All idolatrous customs, all customs that recognize any being as worthy of worship aside from the true God. This brings us face to face with the whole ritual relating to the worship of ancestors, that worship which constitutes as it were both altar and sacrifice, invocation and benediction, in these Asiatic cults. Whatever latitude Romanism may grant to its adherents, Protestantism can make no compromise with it or with anything that relates to it. To the heathen and to the partially instructed Christians, this undoubtedly seems like making a very literal application of the Saviour's words about leaving father and mother, etc., and scores of times when I asked some one in my audience, whom I know to be familiar with the tenets of the religion I was preaching, why he did not become a Christian, has come the reply: I cannot forsake my parents. Yet it is not often filial regard that leads the heathen to the performance of the foolish and expensive ceremonies of ancestral worship; it is usually the slavish fear of incurring the displeasure of the dead and of thus bringing calamities upon themselves. I have found it a good plan to remind my heathen audiences of the kind forgiving words of their parents in their last illness, and have rarely failed to get them to

confess that suspecting a father or mother of such malignity as to bring sickness and losses upon their children was the most unfilial conduct of which they could be guilty. "We all love to have our children think well of us." As to the Christians, who in the hour of special temptation show a leaning toward this element of their former religion, it is usually sufficient to remind them of their faith in God to bring from them the confession of their bondage to a religious custom, that has no religion in it whatever for them. They usually plead their sense of indebtedness to the dead for temporal prosperity, as their only excuse for participating in any of these ceremonies at all. I recollect that the first member of the Methodist Church who took a degree in the competitive examinations, urged as an excuse for having worshipped at his ancestors' tomb, this feeling of obligation, and the absence of any prescribed ceremony or act by which he could satisfy the demands of his overflowing heart.

I fear that many of the native Christians, shirking the cross of a very public confession of their faith before their heathen neighbors and friends, and yet unwilling to break with the church, tacitly allow some unbaptized relative to act as master of ceremonies. In some families all the sons but one are urged to become Christians, because of the restraint from vice they have discovered in a connection with the church, the son who is kept back being jealously guarded against all Christian influences in order that he may perform the heathen ceremonies at the grave of the parents. We meet men who are kept out of the church because an approaching idolatrous anniversary, on which they are to perform a prominent part, holds out a small fortune to them. Thank God, we also meet with not a few who count both the honor and the gain but dross that they may win Christ. I do not think that the church members who are received with a proper degree of care, are often guilty of open idolatry, but I do fear that there is often a

highly injurious compromise with it. I had the sad privilege of burying our first church member in Foochow, The man had long stood as a pillar of the church, and had been a fair sample of an unpaid Christian. His wife, a woman of considerable intelligence, had been employed as our first Bible reader. There seemed to be more than usual at stake; Christianity itself, it seemed to me, was on trial the day that man was buried. Yet from the beginning to the end of the ceremony, notwithstanding all remonstrances, the fire-crackers, mock-money, incense and rice-cakes were a far more prominent feature than the Bible, Christian hymns and prayers. The widow claimed that in the absence of her sons the brothers of the deceased had solo control of the burial ceremonies. At the next meeting of the officers of the church she was tried and expelled from the church. This grieved and surprised us almost as much as her offence, yet I have heard no one say that the punishment was unjust. <606/7> The tendency to compromise with idolatry cannot be too closely watched nor too thoroughly rooted out.

The worship of heaven and earth comes next in importance after the worship of ancestors. If the latter is the enemy's capitol, the former is his chief citadel. If the one is really in our possession, the other will not offer much resistance. But herein may lie a serious danger. A foe is not harmless simply because he is weaker than another one. We do not guard our weddings and joyful occasions as carefully as we guard our funerals. I fear our converts are not so fully on their guard on these occasions as at other times. Many of the native expressions of joy or gratitude have a religious element in them, which is almost invariably idolatrous or grossly superstitious. I cite the case of our first Christian graduate once more. On the opening or completion of some great enterprise, the beginning or completion of a house, when a son is born in the family, on their anniversaries, when they graduate or take a degree—on all these occasions they will seek

for some fitting, visible, as well as audible expression of their feelings. They are, after all, wonderfully like ourselves, and I fear, in our enthusiasm to enlarge the borders of our beloved Zion, we have overlooked this fact, and have not given sufficient attention to the internal finish of our structure. Some years ago the Methodist conference at Foochow appointed one of its senior native members to draw up an order of exercises for the more frequent occasions. The plan was to examine his work, and, if found suitable, to continue in the matter until the whole field should have been covered and no excuse left for any one to resort to doubtful practices. The relief afforded by his work was so great, however, that nothing further was done. Why could not committees be appointed at each port or central station, consisting of one foreign and one native representative from each denomination to take up this important work and give the native church something uniform and comprehensive? This would be one of the many ways in which we can show forth that beautiful oneness for which our blessed Master prayed. I am strongly inclined to give a very short answer to the question before us, so far as the customs we have considered are concerned; it is this: Christians shall be required to abandon native customs in so far as they have been supplied with something better.

2nd. Christians should be required to abandon all cruel customs. Here I would emphasize the word "abandon;" we are not called upon to provide substitutes for these customs. And while our church members utterly abandon these customs, we should teach and direct them in a pronounced condemnation of the same. Let every one become a preacher of the gospel of humaneness. Let the refined cruelty of foot-binding and of selling children away from their parents, at an age when they feel it most, never be mentioned as becoming followers of the loving Saviour. I have heard cries of anguish from the victims of both these customs that might have moved the very rocks to pity. O,

the cruelty of heathenism! Would that the lukewarm <608/9> that I can recall, been severe and relentless; yet I have always felt assured that they understood the disease better than I did and ought to be allowed to choose the remedy.

With regard to the use of intoxicants, there is as yet no very pronounced sentiment. This is due, chiefly, to the unspeakable evils of the opium curse which absorb all our attention. In Korea, where there is but little opium, drunkenness prevails to a frightful extent and will be a fruitful topic for sermons, tracts and church rules. I know of no heathen community in which gambling does not exist. It is the chameleon in the nest of reptiles we have labeled vicious customs. We have barely more than laid down the rule concerning it in one form, when it turns up in another. It seems to be our chief duty bore to help our people to discriminate between a proper spirit of thrift and enterprise, and the subtle disguises in which the temptation to gambling approaches them. They must be taught to look with suspicion on everything and everybody that promises gain without requiring an equivalent in return. The so-called brawl-room at their weddings is a temporary reaction from that rigid custom which forbids the commingling of the sexes. It consists of different degrees and forms of rudeness, immorality and lewdness in different places. It is not always known by the same name. I believe it is always objectionable.

Finally, let us not, forget in all our legislation for the native church to point faithfully to the great Master and Pattern. Though the Baptist felt unworthy to stoop down and unloose our Saviour's shoe-latchet, there came from the lips of infinite wisdom the words, "Suffer it now, for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." For the customs that had, under the guise of religious zeal, insinuated themselves into the sanctuary and turned the house of the Lord into a den of thieves, a scourge of small

ords in his hand was not too severe; for the performance of a civil duty, and lest He should “cause them to stumble,” the shekel from the fish’s mouth was not too miraculous.