

Circulation of the Saints (7)

The Discarding of Tradition

Czeslaw Milosz, winner of the 1980 Nobel Prize for Literature, remarked in his acceptance speech in Stockholm that our age is characterized by a "refusal to remember." I would suggest, however, that the modern mind has grown indifferent to history rather than displaying an outright refusal to remember. The desire for the immediate, and the quest to be entertained, which is fueled by television and the Internet trivializes the past "by equating it with outmoded styles of consumption, discarded fashions and attitudes." Christopher Lasch observes that, consequently, "people today resent anyone who draws on the past in serious discussion of contemporary conditions or attempts to use the past as a standard by which to judge the present." This lack of historical awareness also marks the church growth movement. It is particularly unaware of comparisons with earlier periods in the history of the Church that could throw light on how to approach our culture with the Gospel. We can neglect the past or even reject what we understand the past to be, but we cannot live as if it never was. Of all people, Christians should remember the past. We are not the first Christians. We are linked to the people of God of all generations, with a whole set of ideas, beliefs, and traditions. It is our past, which tells us who we are. Without the past we are like a man suffering from amnesia. He is lost, unsure of relationships, incapable of crucial decisions, precisely because he is without his past. Only when his memory returns, when he sure of his past, is he able to relate confidently to his wife and his parents, or to know his place in society. To lose one's memory is to lose one's past, to lose one's past means to be rootless, to be insecure. Hence, Church history is relevant. It is a means by which today's Christians can learn of the ways in which God's people have served Him in the past, and become aware of the great doctrinal debates of the early church and Reformation periods, and their momentous implications for missions and worship.

Loss of Tradition

One of the great myths of church growth marketing analysis is the idea that churches fail because of their ties to traditional beliefs and practices. They think church growth depends on dispensing with tradition. Most megachurches, therefore, have ignored or dismissed traditional forms of worship. John D. Witvliet calls them liturgical laboratories which produce the musical forms, styles, and genres that influence thousands of congregations around the globe. For example, Willow Creek offers online resources for those who plan church services. It offers immediate "access to enhanced tools that will enable you to craft compelling services with greater ease than ever before." Pastors can purchase messages "delivered by Senior Pastor Bill Hybels and other highly skilled teachers... Choose from any of our popular seeker series today and present your first message this Sunday!" Besides service suggestions and sermons, you can also order from the Willow Creek catalogue top songs, etc. Willow Creek seems to act like a Protestant mini -Rome! This entrepreneurial approach to worship neglects the rich

worship heritage of the Church. It appears that many forget that they are not the first generation who thought about the meaning of worship. When worship is cut off from its rich heritage, it becomes impoverished. Instead of the much-heralded variety, there is sameness. This push for everything to sound the same and the same choice of songs is throwing out 20 centuries of music development. Thousands of North American Christians simply assume that music in worship is properly rendered by guitar-led praise band, not an organ, and that the basic genre of liturgical music is not psalms and hymns but choruses and simple songs. In a fictional letter addressed To wounded and bruised musicians, Marva Dawn queries, "But it is terribly painful, isn't it, when you are told that all your training in church music and organ technique won't be needed in the future. Why can't people see the difference between the rich splendor of great music (old and new!) and the flimsy monotony of the same three guitar chords over and over?"

Megachurch architecture also shows lack of historical awareness. Many megachurch buildings are bereft of Christian symbolism and ecclesiastical furniture that evoke the mighty redemptive acts of God. I have seen megachurches which feature an auditorium, film screen, and a platform with band instruments but no pulpit, no communion table and no baptismal font. They looked more like theaters than church sanctuaries. Supporters of these innovations argue that worship space should not offend seekers with incomprehensible symbols, rites, language, or layout.

Rediscovery of Tradition

When a church develops a contemporary worship style, and chooses music and songs without any connection to the past, it isolates a few years out of the 2,000-year history of Christian tradition. We need to recover an appreciation for the great traditions of the Church. The idea of "tradition" is of particular importance to modern North American evangelicalism. It continues to be strongly individualistic, with no real sense of historical "belonging" or rootedness. This attitude is surprising and dangerous in the Church, since who we are depends on remembering the past. Too often, evangelicals have been spiritual lone rangers who proudly or impatiently turned their backs on the church and its heritage - a development which, for the theologian J.I. Packer, is "a surefire recipe for weirdness without end." In his essay, "The Importance of Tradition for Modern Evangelicalism," Alister E. McGrath notes that tradition is an antidote against individualism. The word tradition is best defined as "the process of passing or handing down." In Christian vocabulary it is an awareness of the communal dimension of the Christian faith, over an extended period of time. Being conscious of the tradition does not mean that worship practices cannot be questioned. Tradition is not always right. As the third-century writer Cyprian of Carthage pointed out, "an ancient tradition can just be an old mistake." Tradition is to be honoured where it can be shown to be justified and rejected where it cannot. For example, the critical appraisal of the traditions of the Medieval Church was an integral element of the Reformation. If Martin Luther and John Calvin had not questioned the tradition of the Church of Rome of their time, humanly speaking, there would have been no Reformation. In other words, without reformation tradition becomes distorted, stale, or dead - or "an idolatry." Today, we still talk of the Church constantly in need of reforming. I am firmly convinced of the importance of the

Christian tradition, of the historic and corporate nature of the Christian faith. In his essay "The Comfort of Conservatism," J.I. Packer points out the dangers of refusing "to affirm the positive role of history and community in shaping one's understanding." He notes that everyone has "traditions," whether they recognize them or not; the key question is "whether our traditions conflict with the only absolute standard in these matters: Holy Scripture." The failure to pay attention to the way the church worshiped and evangelized in the past leaves us with inadequate tools to create new forms of worship. When developing cultural relevant worship practices, the acknowledgement of tradition is a willingness to take into account the worship practices of devout Christians in the early church and beyond. When we use the Church's historic liturgies in our search for God-honoring worship, we study what Jaroslav Pelikan calls "the living faith of the dead." In doing so, we are actively conscious of the Church's past. We also remember then our strong bonds with the Christians who have gone before us on the way to the new Jerusalem. Tradition then has the capacity to develop worship forms and evangelism methods while realizing the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church of every age. Tradition then gives us a sense of belonging to a continuing fellowship of believers that stretches throughout time. In light of the many questions raised by the church growth movement and the megachurches, the rediscovery of our Reformed traditions also reduces the danger of being misled by charismatic individuals. It affirms the ongoing importance of the Christian past as a stabilizing influence in rapidly changing times. The turbulent history of the Church shows us that many of the so-called new trends are not so new after all. Tradition acts as a resource and a safeguard, checking unhelpful and unorthodox doctrinal developments by demanding that their supporters explain that what they are doing is in line with the Reformed Confessional traditions. Standing in the tradition of the Church, we don't fear change. I think Marva's Dawn's suggestion for worship renewal is right on. She said, "Instead of throwing away the past, we can update, renew, reform, revive it. We can use new melodies, fresh instruction, thorough education, gentle reminders of what we are doing and why. In an age in which many participants in worship have not been schooled in its habits, to incorporate them all in the ongoing communion of saints requires constant attention and diligent care."

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