

Traditionalism and the Church in America By Jim Petersen Navpress, 1992

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TRADITION AND TRADITIONALISM

Jaroslav Pelikan, in his work *Vindication of Tradition*, makes an important distinction. "Tradition," he says, is the living faith of the dead, [whereas] traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."⁹

Traditions are established customs, often handed down through the generations and generally observed. Traditionalism is the excessive respect for tradition that gives it the status of divine revelation.

Our contemporary church walks the razor's edge between tradition and traditionalism. Although we may affirm our commitment to the Scriptures as our sole authority, things are not that simple in practice. Most of us regularly lose our balance and fall into traditionalism. We get stuck in the past.

Several years ago I was invited to spend a week with a group of missionaries of a certain organization in Brazil. When they invited me, they explained that they were having little difficulty leading people to Christ. Their problem was that they were unable to draw their converts into their churches. They wanted me to teach on this subject.

The thrust of my teaching was similar to what I have been saying in this book. My suggestion was, when you win people, don't even try to dislocate them. Rather, continue to evangelize until you have led others of the same family and barrio to Christ. In that way a nucleus will form and your new believers will wake up one morning to find themselves "churched." It will have surrounded them.

After several days of working through the Scriptures on these ideas, the field leader spoke up and said, "Your organization obviously gives you the freedom to go to the Scriptures, go out and experiment, and then go back to the Scriptures, and keep doing that until you think you've gotten it right. I suggest we all resign and join up with you."

I was embarrassed. Was that what I was communicating, that my mission was better than theirs? I quickly attempted to patch things up. I said, "I'm not suggesting that you reject your past. Give thanks for what God has done through you. Preserve it with care. Only when you go to the next city, or barrio, do things differently. Try applying the things we've been talking about here."

At that, another missionary replied, "You don't understand our situation. We don't have the freedom to just go to the Bible and then go out and apply it like you do."

That is traditionalism. Although those missionaries probably would have defended the authority of Scripture with their lives, they did not have the liberty to use it freely. Their past was in control of their future. This kind of thing goes on all the time in our missionary efforts around the world.

I have a friend who lives and ministers in one of the most secular societies in the world. After several years of barrenness he decided to take a radical step—to stop talking and just listen for an entire year. He spent the following year hanging out wherever people naturally congregated. There he would just listen and ask questions. He refrained from talking about Christ. He emerged from the year with a new understanding of the people, their values and needs. Then he went to the Scriptures and prepared himself to address those values and needs with biblical truth. Very creative! The fruit was not long in coming.

When I visited this friend a few months later, I found him surrounded by about fifty young believers. In that country, that kind of response constituted a significant breakthrough. But to my dismay, I discovered that those fifty young people were busily engaged in reproducing the forms of their all but defunct state church in their new fellowship. They had formalized certain offices and activities, and they were making good progress on their hymnal. They had even sent the brightest of the lot off to seminary to prepare to be their pastor.

As a result of all this, what could have been the beginning of a movement of the gospel in that desperately needy country turned out to be a cul-de-sac. Their unbelieving peers, at first attracted and intrigued by the faith of those new Christians, concluded that what they were witnessing was nothing more than a return to something they had already judged to be hopelessly irrelevant: their state church. They turned away.

By the time these young believers realized what was happening, it was already too late. Church forms are like cement. Once they are in place, they are there for the duration. That group never did grow beyond the original fifty. I found myself wondering what prompts even the most creative among us to do things like that, to suddenly revert to traditionalism as these people did.

TRADITIONALISM AND THE CHURCH IN AMERICA

If the missionary effort can be so easily controlled by the forms of the past, the church in America runs an even greater risk. We have several hundred years of unbroken history in which our churches have evolved into their present forms. In spite of our many denominations and sub-denominations, and in spite of our doctrinal differences, the commonalities still far outnumber the differences. We are pretty much in consensus on church forms and practices. Seldom do we give serious thought or discussion to the influences the growing cultural differences in America might have on the forms and practices of our churches.

Remember our thesis: God's people are in the world to bear witness to the world, and the ministry, both within and without, depends upon every believer. But if we would evaluate our practices against our thesis, we would have to admit to some major omissions and misdirections in the essential functions of our contemporary churches.

These are not secondary matters. We are talking about the essentials of God's plan for making the news of His Son known to the world. We often find that our traditions are in conflict with these essentials. I believe that we are faced with either significant change in our present institutions, or new beginnings outside of them.

I have a friend who was a part of a team that set out to start a church that would be committed to the principles we are talking about here. The team gave priority to the training of elders. The congregation was divided into house churches, each of which was assigned an elder who helped shepherd the members of that house church. Centralized activities were kept at a minimum for the sake of keeping people free to minister to their families and unbelieving friends.

The weekly gatherings were dynamic. I will never forget the first one I visited. People of all sorts were there, from men in business suits to ponytails. Many were new believers. The Bible teaching was down to earth, aimed at people's needs. I loved it.

So did most everyone else who visited. The word got around and soon the migratory flock from neighboring churches came pouring in. Their needs consumed the energies of the leaders of this young church. Their wants gradually set the agenda. The inertia of the traditions of these migrants engulfed this very creative effort and shaped it accordingly. This church continues to be an outstanding body of people. It continues to enjoy godly, gifted leadership, and it continues to be a very powerful ministry.

So what's the problem, we ask? The problem is that the vision that original team had for taking the church into society through the efforts of every believer was frustrated. The pastors have told me that the needs for care among those who come are so consuming that there is no energy left to get out beyond their own front door. This is a very common problem in our churches. An attractive church will grow, but those who come, in the main, do not come out of the world but from the neighboring churches. And they come with clear ideas of what they want in a church. Eventually those ideas prevail. Thus there is an inertia in the church in this country that overcomes the bright new ideas, devours and eventually buries them. The struggle is with traditionalism.

Congregating as a Tradition

We hold strong convictions on the importance of the gathering of the church. "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together" is our refrain. We are good at congregating. Where we have trouble is with some of the other equally essential functions of the church. God's people are not, in essence, a congregation. They are community. "Congregation" is frequently used in the Old Testament to describe the gathering of the people of Israel. "Community" implies life together, a life of caring for one another that touches the full spectrum of our affairs.

We recognize the importance of our gathering for teaching and worship, but congregating has the absolute priority as the predominant form in our churches. We are less clear that we are to live as a community in full view of and among unbelievers. If these were in balance today, the forms of our church would be different beyond recognition. So we proceed, mildly concerned that we "aren't doing more in the area of outreach." Generally, when it comes to outreach, the average believer is left to make his or her own way. It is just not a part of our tradition to plan for our being in the world with the same serious commitment, with the same disposition to invest people, time, and money, as it is for us to provide for our congregating.

This imbalance of commitment often puts Christians who feel called to put their gifts and efforts to use among unbelievers into tension with the rest of the body, if not with their own conscience.

Tensions

One of my personal priorities, as our family moved out of Brazil into a new neighborhood in the states, was to find some friends among our neighbors. The first opportunity presented itself, literally, within the first few minutes after we pulled up in front of our new house.

A neighbor family came out to greet us and to see if they could be of help. Dave and I quickly discovered that we were both joggers. As we compared our schedules to find a common free time, Dave said, "There is one time during the week when I'm always free. That's on Sunday mornings."

My mind raced as I had to decide on the spot. My witness with him was on the line. So I said, "Fine, let's make it 8:00 a.m." Sunday morning found me out jogging the trails around our house with my new neighbor. As we ran we talked. From what I was learning about him, I realized his pilgrimage to Christ needed time. Our program evolved to "reading and running." We would spend an hour or so examining the book of Romans before hitting the trails. This wiped out my Sunday mornings.

Dave was right. Sunday mornings were conflict-free, not only for him, but for everyone else in our neighborhood. After a busy week at work and a Saturday filled with chores such as fixing faucets, taking the dog to get a shot, and doing the supermarket, Sunday morning was the time to kick back and relax. It was time to walk, to smell the roses, to chat with a neighbor. Sundays soon found me involved with the people around us from sunup to sundown.

My life is further complicated by the fact that my work keeps me traveling about half the time. This makes it difficult to be consistent with anything I attempt to do in my hometown. I soon found myself struggling to balance my already divided time between my involvement with my neighbors and my involvement with our church. Sundays were the focal point of my tensions. There was no way for me to feel good about Sundays.

As I would sit in church, I would find myself visualizing our neighborhood, imagining all those people out there, some of whom were dropping broad hints that they too would like to look at the Bible with us - if I would ever find the time for them! I would sit there feeling guilty. So the next Sunday would be given to my neighbors. As I would spend the day with them, I would find myself wondering what I was missing at the church. I'd miss the people, the sermon.

Something had to give. I invited my pastor to have lunch with me to discuss the matter. Over lunch I explained my dilemma. The crux of the matter is that unbelieving neighbors owe us nothing. If we want to go to them, it has to be on their terms, at their convenience, and their turf. Although they might be interested in hearing what we have for them, they are far from being willing to go to a church to get it, especially on a Sunday morning! So there we were, I explained to my pastor, with eternal destinies at stake and with my conscience going off the chart in both directions! We ate our lunch and wondered what to do.

Then I suggested that perhaps the problem lies, in part, in our basic assumptions about the church. Does it not seem odd, I wondered to him, that I could be there in my neighborhood, teaching the Bible to some neighbors who had yet to decide whether or not they were going to believe, and consider that as being outside the ministry of the church? What if I transferred my efforts to the church building? Would that make me an insider? Is the church, then, to be defined by geography? Perhaps our problem is that our definitions of "church," our ecclesiology, draws such a small circle that certain functions essential to its existence cannot even be fitted into it. Could we not, I asked my pastor, draw our circle big enough to include what I was doing in my neighborhood? That thought seemed reasonable to both of us.

Then the pastor asked, "What are you going to do when these people come to Christ?" That, I replied, was impossible to predict. Where these people would eventually find their fellowship would depend, in part, on where they would find their "sense of place." It could even turn out that the body for them would take shape right there on our street.

This conversation with my pastor was an important one for me. We are friends, and I want him to understand and approve of what I'm doing. I have solved my problem, to a point, thanks to the unusual capacity of this pastor to understand. But I am still not at peace.

It is one thing for me to successfully arrange for the freedom I need within my own fellowship to exercise the function I believe God wants me to perform. But I know there are hundreds of others in the body in this country who hunger for involvement with their unbelieving friends of the nature I am describing here. But their chances are slim. Who will equip and empower these people? Who will let them go, grant them the freedom, and then give them the leadership they need? What I am talking about is not, and never has been, a part of our modern ecclesiology. Consequently, I find myself wondering if it is even feasible to hope that we as God's people can break out in this manner. The obstacles are in our own minds, and they are formidable. We are trapped in our own traditionalism.

Are we indeed bound, obliged to endlessly repeat worn patterns, all the while lamenting our impotency to do anything about them? The inertia we are dealing with here resides in the interplay between form and function. Both of these words have appeared repeatedly in the previous paragraphs. An understanding of what they mean and how they work can help us with the answers to the issues we are dealing with.

FORM AND FUNCTION

Function: A necessary or natural action. Example: To sit down.

Form: The pattern or shape that facilitates the function. Example: A chair.

· Function: Cooking, eating, sleeping

· Form: A house

· Function: Transportation

· Form: An automobile

· Function: Bible teaching

· Form: A sermon

It was in an art class at the University of Minnesota that I first heard the terms form and function. A student presented a special project she had done. It was a single large canvas with human figures scattered across it. Beside each figure was an everyday object- a chair, a bicycle, a telephone, a cup - each obviously drawn according to the contour of the figure. She had titled the canvas "Form and Function." I wondered what it meant. I also wondered why the professor was so fascinated by that piece of work. I was unimpressed. Only later did I come to realize that that student was exploring the most fundamental principle of design: the form of an object should be determined by its function, or 1 The architect or artisan who truly understands this principle transform something mundane, like a chair, into an exquisite and timeless piece of art.

The next time I thought about form and function was several years later. We were just beginning our ministry in Brazil and were engrossed in discovering how to communicate the gospel in a predominantly Marxist student world that had rejected the religious institutions of its society, virtually in mass. Our ministry was driven by the two truths that constitute the thesis of this book. We were committed to taking our ministry to people outside the church. And we were also committed to the truth that every believer is gifted and is to be equipped to use what he or she has for the ministry. We understood the application of those truths to mean that those we won to Christ would, in turn, need to become involved in winning their friends and colleagues and establishing them in Christ.

Our commitment to seeing these truths worked out thrust us into a dilemma. We discovered that the people we were bringing to Christ were worlds apart from the "cultures" of the existing churches. Those new believers who did cross over and integrate into them found they had, in the process, destroyed their lifelong network of relationships with friends and family. Their opportunities for outreach virtually ceased to exist because of the cultural distances involved. But if they tried to survive without a body of fellow believers, they would not only be barren, they would be

malnourished and vulnerable to every kind of spiritual danger. It dawned on me that we were really dealing with a problem of form and function.

There were no forms in existence that would enable the people we were reaching to exercise the function of becoming established in Christ and, at the same time, fulfill the function of taking Christ to their friends and families. So we worked together for years, searching the Scriptures for guidance, until we managed to create appropriate forms that enabled us to fulfill the functions of edification and evangelism in that context. Indeed, we have learned that keeping those two functions vital and alive requires perpetual vigilance. The very forms we create have the perverse tendency to quickly lose their original usefulness and take on secondary leanings of their own. But that, I learned, is the inevitable dynamic that constantly goes on between form and function. The Bible is filled with both illustrations and warnings to this effect.

Form and Function in the Bible

In Exodus 18 we find Moses with a problem on his hands. He was spending all day, every day, attending to the needs of an endless line of people. Everyone in that camp of over a million people with an argument to resolve would come to him. It was killing Moses, and the people were getting poor service. His father-in-law, Jethro, had a suggestion. He said, "What is this you are doing. . . ? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?"¹⁰ Jethro suggested that Moses divide the work and then delegate it to honest, competent men. Moses did this. He appointed a body of judges. He thus created a form to accomplish a critical function - maintaining justice.

This form outlasted Moses. It outlasted Israel and lived on to become a Jewish institution. Forms do that.

. This body of judges reappears in Ezekiel 8. By this time God had sentenced Israel to judgment. In this passage He is explaining, through Ezekiel, why He had passed such a terrible sentence on His people. He took Ezekiel into a chamber. It was filled with idols, and its walls were covered with obscene things. There, in the middle of that chamber, was that body of seventy elders Moses had inaugurated some five hundred years earlier. They were all there, and Jaazaniah was occupying Moses' seat. Ezekiel had been given a look at the thought life of Israel's leadership. God was saying, I have to judge this nation because of its judges. They have become perverse! What irony!

That form of seventy elders survived the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities and reappeared intact. Five hundred years later, when Jesus appeared on the scene, there it was. It was known as the Sanhedrin. Jesus described it thus: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So . . . do everything they tell you, but do not do what they do. For they do not practice what they preach."