

## Chapter 7

### We Need a Different Vocabulary

*Tradition is entirely different from habit, even from an excellent habit, for habit is by definition an unconscious acquisition and tends to become mechanical, whereas tradition results from a conscious and deliberate acceptance. A real tradition is not the relic of a past irretrievably gone; it is a living force that animates and informs the present...tradition presupposes the reality of what endures. It appears as an heirloom, a heritage that one receives on condition of making it bear fruit before passing it on to one's descendants.*

Igor Stravinsky

*Without tradition, art is a flock of sheep without a shepherd. Without innovation, it is a corpse.*

Winston Churchill

When I came across this quotation from Winston Churchill, it reinforced my understanding that tradition and innovation are two sides of the same coin, and in fact, have a mutual dependence. However, throughout history, the famous and not-so-famous have opined on the *apparent* dichotomy of these two correlative, complementary terms. More often than not, the criticism has condemned tradition (with a special vitriol for religion) and praised innovation, focusing on the first-glance superficial divergence rather than any deeper interrelatedness.

Such erroneous thinking by countless individuals constitutes a false distinction – an artificial either/or relationship when in fact a complementary relationship exists. Such critics fail to distinguish similarities from distinction; they appeal to selective evidence or

emotion to support their position; they interject their subjective worldview perspective; and often resort to unwarranted generalizations or overspecification to comport with their belief, argument, or experience.

Many terms we use in our conversations about worship arts tend to divide us into polarized camps. The labels we choose often have the effect of separating church musicians (and congregations) into “traditional” and “contemporary” styles of worship. Such an arbitrary division has been one of the causes of disagreement and debate in churches for several decades, if not centuries. However, perhaps the labels that are selected create an artificial partition that unduly separates rather than unites us in our worship.

When we stop to consider the evolution of church music, we see in many instances that what was once contemporary has been absorbed into more traditional offerings. Hymnals abound with selections that were contemporary in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries that are still being sung by choirs and congregations in sanctuaries today, suggesting both a contemporary and traditional quality about them.

The difficulty with defining what is “contemporary” is that it has many nuanced synonyms, a few of which include: modern, unconventional, stylish, fresh, fashionable, innovative, novel, present, revolutionary, state-of-the-art, trendy and so on. Different denominations or congregations will gravitate toward the definition or synonym that best aligns with their approach to corporate worship, and is often the case, the same term may have different meaning within those groups.

History overflows with artistic, musical, and literary innovations; some of which resulted in incremental change to traditional practices, while others were more revolutionary in

their effect. Some were quickly cast by the wayside while others took root to make their way into that category we call “time-honored tradition.”

Tradition implies a style that is grounded on a strong, solid foundation. Tradition suggests returning to known fertile soil to plant next season’s crops. Tradition serves us best when it guides worship from yesterday to today and beyond; it does not and *should* not imprison us to a lifeless form of *traditionalism* as so many academicians and armchair philosophers over the ages in their confusion with *tradition* have been wont to proclaim. As C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Abolition of Man*:

*A great many of those who “debunk” traditional...values have in the background values of their own which they believe to be immune from the debunking process.<sup>1</sup>*

Tradition is not the piling on of inert orthodoxy, crushing believers under the weight of centuries-old practices, perhaps unnecessarily adding distance between them and the simple truth of the Gospels and Christ’s sacrifice. Otherwise, strict adherence to orthodoxy becomes a millstone much as the Old Testament laws were because the outward appearance of piety can easily mask that which resides in the heart. For Christian tradition to remain alive, it must include those theologically sound, scripturally affirmed adaptations that further the tradition in an uncompromising vernacular for today’s worshippers. In the words of N.T Wright, traditions “tell us where we have come

---

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis. *The Abolition of Man*. HarperOne, 2009. p. 29.

from. Scripture itself is a better guide as to where we should now be going.”<sup>2</sup>

Innovation is a byproduct of tradition and cannot come about without it. The late essayist and novelist Carlos Fuentes wrote that “...the ‘new’ is an inflection point on a preceding form; novelty is always a variation on the past.”<sup>3</sup>

Tradition underscores the truth that the church and the Christian faith are not fleeting nor impermanent, but reflect and pronounce the one true reality. The fabric of church music throughout the ages has been woven with the precious threads of countless anthems, carols, chants, chorales, hymns, masses, motets, plainsong, preludes, psalms, responses, spiritual songs, and many other forms from the saints that petition, praise, proclaim, and even lament an almighty God. To deny that these inspired, time-tested, musical and poetic testimonials are irrelevant today pompously ignores the truth of ecclesiastical and sacred music history.

Tradition finds its strongest presence in church music. Tradition serves as an important template for providing a balanced, forward-moving, theologically “sound” music ministry. An innovative approach to church music requires knowledge of where we have been to understand what direction going forward will continue to best serve the congregation. Without tradition anchoring us to the experience of the saints who came before us, we are at the mercy of whim and whimsy that manages to work its way into our sanctuaries, promulgated by a pop-culture zeal to

---

<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright. *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*. Zondervan, 2005. p. 119.

<sup>3</sup> Carlos Fuentes. *Myself with Others: Selected Essays*. Parrar, Straus, and Giroux. 1990.

be relevant. Being relevant sometimes can require compromises that may introduce such things that are deemed undeserving, objectionable, and outside the faith.

The creative impulse in church music is hastened by the abiding work of the Holy Spirit. As church history has revealed over two millenia, tradition undergoes refinement, improvement, and modification at a pace that maintains congregational unity and theological truth, unless that progression is punctuated by Reformation and schism. Even then through Reformation, ecclesiastical and social schisms, innovations that are often born from such events and become integrated with tradition affirm the Holy Spirit's presence and influence.

However, not every creative work, form, style, or action that arises from innovation necessarily bears the stamp of inspiration from the Holy Spirit, and not every component of long-held tradition demands continued use. According to Kevin Vanhoozer, "If church practice were truly inseparable from the work of the Spirit, one could never recognize false teaching or illegitimate practices."<sup>4</sup>

It is often said that today's tradition was yesterday's innovation. For example, as early as 1501, the first Protestant hymnbooks began to appear as did the re-appearance of public worship. In the blink of an eye, the Reformers displaced nearly ten centuries of high church maneuvering and influence. Today we take for granted congregational participation in worship as tradition, but in the early 16th century, it was innovation.

The Christian faith has experienced extended periods of stability that have been punctuated by ideas and individuals who

---

<sup>4</sup> Kevin VanHoozer. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2005. p. 190

shifted paradigms in how that faith is expressed. Martin Luther began writing hymns in 1523, liberating music from the clutches of the Roman Catholic Church. Luther's disruption of ecclesiastical equilibrium actually initiated a revolution in the liturgy, church music, and the arts. He was very much a traditionalist, only seeking to eliminate those liturgical and musical practices that contradicted Scripture. In 1521, he translated Latin texts and the New Testament into German vernacular.

One of the most beloved hymns in the Lutheran and Protestant tradition is Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Bach used strains of the tune in his Christmas Oratorio. Mendelssohn used it as the theme for the fourth and final movement of his Symphony No. 5, Op. 107 (1830), which he named "Reformation" in honor of the Reformation begun by Luther. It has been reused and repurposed by other composers such as Debussy and Ralph Vaughn Williams. Those of us who grew up in the 1960s may remember a version of "A Mighty Fortress" as the theme music for the children's TV show, Davey and Goliath.

Today, orchestras as well as instrumental and vocal ensembles can choose from a variety of repurposed, innovative arrangements that have a clear, connected provenance with Luther's original version.

Bach based one of his most recognized and imaginatively noteworthy cantatas, No. 4 "Christ Lay in the Bond's of Death" on Luther's hymn, "Jesus Christ is Risen," which was written some 175 years earlier. Bach's cantata is a shining example of how a composition immersed in 1700 years of tradition gave rise to a fresh, magnificent work of art.

For the church and church musicians, an underlying aspect of their works must mirror how we grow in our Christian faith: at times, we need the fresh, the new that anchors us to the promise behind Christ's sacrifice; at times, we need the contentment and assurance of the recognizable that accomplishes the same purpose. But it also means embracing the admonition for proper balance, as written in I Thessalonians 5:21 to "prove all things; hold fast that which is good."

Newness must be examined for artistic integrity, dissected and held up to Scripture for theological truth, and time tested before it can be deemed suitable for adoption (that is, be introduced as part of tradition) in the church. Tradition can give rise to innovation; and innovation can likewise become tradition. For the robust and vital church music ministry, both are essential, whereby a rich and varied panoply of proper compositions awaits to be placed in service of the church; other artistic expressions as well are guided by such bounds, which, when heeded, help provide artists with a perspective for balancing creative expression and artistic restraint.

The church musician lives in a creative realm bounded by tradition and innovation; however, what is of greater value for the artist is how the creative impulse embraces that which is praiseworthy, prayerful, and assertive in its presentation. Artistic expression in the service of the church—whether that expression follows tradition or extends it through innovation—performs its heavenly design when it is offered through the truth of Scripture, carried forth by artistic integrity, guided by the Holy Spirit, attuned to cultural sensitivity and thoughtfulness, and moreover, to the glory of Almighty God.

We must also be reminded of yet another type of balance required for Christian worship: that between the theologian and the church musician, as Eric Routley stated in the closing paragraph of *Church Music and Theology*:

*It will remain bad theology so long as the theologian and the artist refuse to communicate with one another; as long as the theologian regards the artist as fundamentally a temperamental trifler, and the artist the theologian as an obstinate and ignorant theorist, the best we shall get is patronage from church to music, together with tentative moralisms from musicians to musicians. At worst it will be, as it often in practice is, a wicked waste of an opportunity for glorifying God through fruitful partnership.<sup>5</sup>*

The church musician, therefore, works hard to articulate the human heart's longing to know and praise God and the want to illuminate to all God's person, presence, and works.

---

<sup>5</sup> Eric Routley, *Church Music and Theology*, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959. p. 110.