

## TRADITION AND TRADITIONALISM

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The late distinguished historian, Jaroslav Pelikan, drew an important distinction between two ways in which we are inclined to regard the past. On the one hand, he contended, there is the “dead faith of the living,” which he labeled “traditionalism.” On the other hand, he defined “tradition” as the living faith of the dead.

In the first instance, the past is the norm from which we may not depart. In the second instance, while the past should be allowed to cast a vote on present attitudes and action, it is not necessarily the determinative vote. Traditions can thus be extended and reinterpreted, while ‘traditionalists’ refuse to accept such moves.

D.S. Warner sojourned for only a brief moment with the organized holiness movement, but during that stay he adopted many of its conventional attitudes and expectations concerning Christian behavior and practice. Many early ‘saints’ made the same pilgrimage from the holiness movement to the Church of God. They dressed very plainly and modestly with skirts that touched the tops of their shoes and long sleeves on their blouses; they did not wear jewelry or makeup of any kind and regarded such personal adornment as exhibits of ostentation and pride.

Most famously—and from the perspective of the early twenty-first century I would add unfortunately—early Church of God people battled each other over the question whether a truly holy Christian man could wear a necktie. This did not mean these early ‘saints’ were killjoys. To his lasting credit, E.E. Byrum was known to have played an occasional round of golf. Warner also taught that the experience of holiness exerted the positive force of love on the church. Its unity was achieved through the love poured into Christian hearts through the work of the sanctifying Spirit.

Nevertheless, not a few of the ‘saints’ over more than one generation tended to harp on the prohibitions they believed holiness requires, with the unfortunate result that many Church of God folk came to define sanctification in terms of what Christians did not do rather than what they actually did. Over time, people wearied with a largely negative message, with the result that many Church of God adherents today are confused about the holiness to which God still calls people—if they even think about the idea at all.

Consider the biblical command that we are to be holy as God is holy. Could it be that the church’s holiness can, after the image of God’s holiness in Genesis 18, understand clearly and practice a holiness that is scarcely negative or concerned with prohibitions; rather than seeking and embracing the good? There is no reason to believe that such a church will wink at sin any more than God winked at the evil in Sodom and Gomorrah. However, such holiness will identify the church as a catalyst for reconciliation and mercy in the world rather than mark it as a community preoccupied with what Christians ought not do. Imagine holiness people concerned more about showing mercy than measuring the length of a woman’s skirt, or whether a man decorated his neck with a piece of cloth.

Jaroslav Pelikan insisted that the church ought not to neglect the expectation of holiness. But it would be little other than traditionalism to insist that the twenty-first century church be concerned with the same negative behavioral codes as its fore-parents. On his view, tradition—the extension and reinterpretation of the ideals of the past—appears to much more nearly resemble what could also be defined as historical thought.

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