

Mission and Tradition: Seeking the Balance in Ministry

TEXT: 2 Thess. 2: 13-17

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Televangelists and indeed Evangelicals in general have developed a bad reputation in our culture. Sometimes we aren't fools for Christ, we're just fools. An illustration of how bad it has gotten is that now the federal government is investigating some of the television ministries. Because "evangelicals" have not policed themselves (so to speak) Sen. Grassley from Iowa and the Senate Finance Committee are going to call the prosperity gospel to account. There are six ministries under investigation and perhaps it will spread. I know Christians are nervous about all this and the implications of government intrusion but we have brought a lot of this on ourselves – for our pitiful portrayal of Christianity before our culture.

Outsider's perception of the Church is one of the key challenges 21st C. American Christianity faces as God summons us to be intentionally missional. When we think about the church being missional, the very existence of St. Paul's letters to the churches are overwhelming evidence of the missionary nature of the early church. The first great missional thinker was the Apostle Paul himself. When he responded to the Macedonian call, he left Asia Minor for Greece and would there establish churches that spread the gospel message westward to all of Europe. Paul's missional strategy was to go to strategic centers of Greek culture, Roman administration and Jewish influence. A target city for Paul was Thessalonica, the largest city in all of Macedonia – a center of trade with a good harbor, a Roman provincial capital, the major Roman highway to the east traveled through it (*Via Egnatia*) and here was a significant community of Jews. Scholars debate how long Paul, Silas and Timothy may have stayed – at least three weeks (he mentions 3 Sabbaths) or perhaps as long as six months. But we do know the people responded to the gospel and the Holy Spirit birthed a new church among Greeks.

Much study has gone into exploring Paul's missionary methods and that is certainly worthy of our attention. The Church in America has tried to emulate St. Paul's passion for church planting; the American church has historically been one of the great missionary sending countries of the modern era. This is the legacy of the great evangelical movement in Britain and America. God has used us mightily around the globe – but of course, there is much more still to do.

In 1989 at Lausanne II, a worldwide gathering of evangelical mission forces met in Manila. Evangelicals from America were well represented. There was a time in the schedule for national gatherings – during this time participants met with their fellow countryman to pray and strategize about how to reach their particular country for Christ. The group from America spent their time talking about how to mobilize American churches to evangelize other countries in the world. It didn't occur to the Americans that their own country needed to be reached. Well, that kind of thinking has drastically changed in the last two decades.

One of the critical thinkers of our time who has helped Western Christians focus on reaching their own nations with the gospel of Christ is missionary statesman Leslie Newbigin. In the 1970's Newbigin returned from the mission field to England. Drawing on his years of missionary experience

he helped fuel a widespread dialogue about mission in North America. In his books *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986) and *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (1989) Newbigin indicated how we are now in a cross-cultural missionary situation in Western culture. According to Newbigin, the gospel and its communication must be a “challenging relevance” to American culture – relevant when it is embodied in terms which the people of the culture can understand, and challenging because Jesus always brings critique to every culture. As Newbigin has grappled with the issues of gospel and culture, he has warned us of the twin dangers of syncretism and irrelevance. I think evangelicals in this country still struggle with both.

On the relevance side, a crucial question is understanding how our culture perceives the church. Asking this question is important if we want to connect effectively with people outside the faith. In a book published in 2007, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity*, researchers from the Barna Group report on a three-year study of how “outsiders” view Christians. Researchers interviewed representative samples of atheists, agnostics and persons of other faiths to try and grasp how young adults in our culture view Christianity. The research was limited to samples of sixteen to twenty-nine year olds (Busters, and Mosaics) of which there are about 24 million in the country. If we are really serious about reaching the younger generations for Christ, understanding their world is a necessary starting point.

While there has always been a divide between generations, it appears that between young adults in their twenties and older adults there is a significantly widening gap. What are these 16-29 year olds like: Relationships are a driving force for these young people and loyalty to their friends is a high value. But at the same time they are fiercely individualistic. They consume massive hours of media – music, movies, websites; they are constantly looking for fresh experiences and new sources of motivation; they view life in a nonlinear, chaotic way, so they don’t mind contradiction and ambiguity; and spirituality is important but it’s just one element of a successful, eclectic life. The research also indicates that many young adults who were involved in a church as a teenager, disengage from church life and Christianity at some point during early adulthood.

According to the research, Christians are primarily perceived for what they stand against. We have become famous for what we oppose, rather than what we are for. Consider this statement by one of the outsiders interviewed: “Most people I meet assume that Christian means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, antigay, anti-choice, angry, violent, illogical, empire building; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn’t believe what they believe.” How do you respond to that statement? Is your reaction:

Right on man, I am against all that sinful stuff.

Does it make you angry because you think it’s an unfair caricature?

Does your heart ache with deep sadness?

In the national surveys with young people (“outsiders”), researchers have found the three most common perceptions of present-day Christianity – anti-homosexual (91%), judgmental (87%) and hypocritical (85%). These big three are followed by other negative perceptions, embraced by a majority of young adults: old-fashioned, too involved in politics, out of touch with reality, insensitive to

others, boring, not accepting of other faiths, confusing. When young adults think of the Christian faith, these are the images that come to mind. This is what a new generation really thinks about Christianity. We're not just talking about the Wacko's on TV, this is how we're all perceived.

What are we supposed to do with all this? Some of you may be thinking: who cares, what these people think, Christ said the world would hate us. Aren't we supposed to oppose this anything goes post-modern mindset? God's truth and holiness are certainly fundamental but so are his grace and his love. Sometimes outsiders don't see the mercy, the compassion, the forgiveness and the love that should characterize God's people. We ought to listen to these things. As the Barna researchers point out - hearing what outsiders say helps keep us objective. And what people think about "Christians" influences how they respond to us. Do we want to represent Christ effectively to this generation? Our effectiveness, humanly speaking, (I'm in no way discounting the Sovereignty of the Spirit) is tied to these things. There is not a Pelagian bone in my body, but, we must do our part.

We need to pray and seek the Spirit; and we need to listen to folks that are doing contemporary ministry to young adults. To be intentionally missional, we've got to think long and hard about how to enter into these young people's lives and communicate the gospel of hope. Do you know what you get when you cross a Presbyterian with a Jehovah's Witness? Someone who knocks on the door and then doesn't have anything to say. That's not an option; we must have something to say to young adults in our communities and in our churches. This was St. Paul's heartbeat, to enter into Greek culture and bring the good news into their world.

One of the most sobering findings by the Barna researchers was that young people in our churches are also struggling with Christianity. A tragic error we have made is not teaching the faith to our young people. Most Mosaics and Busters have gone to church sometime in their lives (82%) and 65% say they made a commitment to Christ at some point in their lives. But, as the researchers point out, these young folks embraced a cheap grace. Here's what the researchers concluded: "It is easy to embrace a costless form of Christianity in America today, and we have probably contributed to that by giving people a superficial understanding of the gospel and focusing only on their decision to convert."

This is the very thing that Willow Creek Church has recently admitted. When one thinks about being missional in the American context no one has been a trend setter more than Bill Hybels and the Willow Creek Community Church. Thousands of eager disciples have read his books and/or made the pilgrimage to Chicago to see how it's done. Willow Creek has taken shots from naysayers for years. But, when I think about critics of Willow Creek's style of ministry, I think of Dwight Moody's comment when someone criticized his evangelistic methods – he replied: "I like the way I do evangelism better than the way you don't do it." We've all learned some valuable things from Willow Creek.

Hybel's recent admission that Willow has fallen woefully short of all they had hoped to accomplish has been an eye-opening revelation about the seeker-sensitive movement. We need to listen to Hybels when he admits they have made some huge mistakes. Willow Creek in the last year completed a multi-year study on their own ministry philosophy and programs. What did they discover – they discovered they have been woefully inadequate in maturing people in Christ. All the glitz, slick advertizing, lights, skits, cool music have produced big crowds but have not produced solid disciples of

Christ. Hybels admits: “Some of the stuff that we have put millions of dollars into thinking it would really help our people grow and develop spiritually, when the data actually came back it wasn’t helping people that much. . . We made a mistake. . . . We should have gotten people, taught people how to read their Bible between services, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own.”

It’s not just Willow Creek, it’s much of the Evangelical world. In all our good intentions to be missional, we have neglected the second half of the Great Commission where Jesus told us to teach disciples everything he has commanded. We have fallen down on the job when it comes to producing real disciples whose faith and practice conform to the Word of God. It is at this point, I think St. Paul’s insight in our passage of Scripture is so timely for the contemporary church. (Some of you were wondering if I’d ever talk about the Bible – well, here it is, so listen up.) The apostle Paul was passionate about the Thessalonian believers, these were his spiritual children – he could not endure them being shallow followers of Christ that drift about after every new teaching that comes along.

The occasion of Paul’s second epistle to the Thessalonians, was a prophesy or letter given to the church which deceptively claimed to be from Paul but it was not. Chapter two of this epistle indicates that the substance of the letter was a claim that the Day of the Lord had already come. In no uncertain terms, Paul assures the Thessalonian church that this letter was not from his hand, and in fact, there are a number of specific things that will take place before Jesus returns – Paul here specifically mentions a “Man of Lawlessness” (who will come in the power of Satan) and set himself up as God. Christ will appear in his second coming and slay this evil one and all those who have been deceived. This is the immediate context of our passage.

Paul follows this instruction on end times, with an exhortation in the next few verses to hold fast to the teachings they had received from Paul. He implores: “ignore this false teaching which has crept into your midst, instead cling to the truth.” I want to draw particular attention to verse 15. . . .

“So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us” (vs. 15). NASV

I want us to look carefully at this verse. Now, I know in homiletics we teach seminary students, not to talk about Greek and Hebrew in sermons – but I’m not the homiletics professor, so I’m going to do it anyway. The Greek literally says “stand and hold the traditions.” The words *stand* and *hold* are present imperatives – and mean – *stand firm continually, keep holding fast*. Paul is saying don’t lose your grip on the things I have either told you in person or written to you by letter. This is a common Pauline exhortation – hold on to what you have, don’t waiver, let no one take it from you. What is more novel to our ears is what he tells them to hold on to – “the traditions.”

If you have the NIV you’ll see that the verse says, “hold to the teachings” but look at the asterisk at the bottom and you’ll note it says “traditions.” There’s a simple reason, it **is** the word “*tradition*” (*paradosis*) not the word for “teaching” that Paul normally uses (*didache*). This is the same Greek word used by Jesus when he rebuked the scribes and Pharisees – “neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.” (Mark 7: 7,8) Paul talks about these traditions of the Jews in

the book of Galatians. When he's giving his own pedigree, he states: "I was extremely jealous for my ancestral traditions." (Gal. 1:14). And, the apostle uses this word (paradosis) "tradition" when he speaks of the Colossian heresy: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men." (Col. 2:8). So the word "tradition" definitely has a negative connotation in multiple places in Scripture.

So what does the apostle intend in this text when he uses the word "tradition" in a positive vein? Paul is urging the Thessalonians to hold firm to the traditions they had received from the apostolic evangelists – either by word of mouth or in writing. These are not just "traditions of men" but apostolic instruction that is to guide the new churches. What is the content of this tradition? The word "traditions" means both Christian teaching (doctrine) and Christian practice (living). In the context of vs. 15 Paul is correcting false teaching about Jesus' Second Coming – he says hold firm to the tradition – the correct teaching. Compare this usage with 2 Thess. 3:6 (the next chapter) where Paul says, "keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the *tradition* you received from us." So then, both how one lives and what one believes are a part of "tradition."

The root idea of the word (paradosis) is "that which is **handed down.**" This was the Pauline method, pass on the tradition to faithful men who will pass it on to others. He commends the church at Corinth because they "hold firmly to the *traditions*, just as I delivered them to you." (1 Cor. 11:2). The Christian faith is a tradition that has been handed down to us – a tradition that entails doctrinal teaching, ethical instruction and ecclesiastical practice – *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxis*. This apostolic tradition has been handed down to us in Scripture and the history of the Church. In essence church history is merely the story of how God's people have understood the Bible down through the centuries.

Protestants (particularly Evangelicals) get nervous whenever one mentions the word "tradition." A big part of the problem is that we've confused *traditionalism* with *tradition*. The late church historian Jaroslav Pelikan gave a wonderful definition of the difference:

"Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living....it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name."

Tradition is not something to be avoided but when properly understood it is a priceless treasure of the Christian. On the other hand, when tradition becomes an end in itself it can be toxic. The tradition of the Church must always be open to reform under the Word of God.

Many Protestants today are confused about the role of tradition and think church history doesn't matter. Many evangelicals have forgotten the wisdom of the first Protestant reformers. Luther and Calvin were both opposed to the elevation of individual interpretation over the corporate judgment of the church. Private interpretation is the mother of heresy and the radical 16th Anabaptists, who began to deny the deity of Christ and the Trinity, were proof of this very real danger. Biblically-sound Christian theology must have foundations in the interpretation of the Scriptures by the historic Church lest the Bible become a nose of wax that can be molded to suit any personal whim.

In our rush to be missional and relevant (which we must do, and is vitally important), if we're not careful, we can forget the tradition and the balance it brings to ministry. Every generation is not free to reinvent Christianity in its own image – which I think some of the mega-churches have come close to doing. In some corners of evangelicalism, there are churches that have devolved into marginally-Christian sects. There is an adolescent iconoclasm out there which delights to bash the church. In Charlotte, we almost have a cult-of-the-month club – new churches pop up every month, sometimes with self appointed preachers with no ordination or training from any legitimate ecclesiastical body – and often they are convinced no one else is doing church right. It's become everyone doing what is right in his own eyes. The 12th C. medieval mystic Bernard of Clairvaux has a word of wisdom for this: "He who takes himself for a master, becomes the disciple of a fool."

As those called to be teachers in the church, we must primarily sit at the feet of the apostles and learn – that's why we study Scripture and we encourage all our sheep to study the Word. But, we ought also to sit at the feet of the saints (especially the great Fathers/Mothers of the Church) and learn from them – they weren't perfect, they had clay feet like we do, but, they have left us a rich deposit of spiritual insight that we neglect at our own peril. We cannot live in the past, but, we are shallow people if refuse to learn from the past. Not everything in the past is equally valuable (in fact, some of it needs to be discarded) but where are those things that are worthy of our emulation? Someone put it this way: "Wisdom is learning to take from the altar of the past, the fire not the ashes."

Praise God for missional innovation; praise God for intentional ministry to outsiders; praise God for those moving into their world; but, when these strategies are not tethered to historic Christianity (the tradition) they may come dangerously close to teaching a gospel of half-truths and God forbid – even heresy. Losing the balance of mission and tradition in ministry can be deadly because when people have a false understanding of the faith, they don't live as authentic believers. Being both missional and rooted in the tradition is not an easy task – but it has implications for every aspect of ministry. There are no easy answers but we dare not neglect the question if we care about bearing fruit that will last.

Let me talk to you now about a practical way we can seek the balance in ministry. I'm convinced the issue comes down ultimately to our ecclesiology – our beliefs about the church. There are problems on both sides of the continuum, those who see themselves as more missional, and those who consider themselves more traditional – both have ignored certain aspects of a biblical doctrine of the church. And neglecting a full-orbed doctrine brings imbalance to ministry. In all of St. Paul's letters his chief concern was for the health of the churches. His missional work is a given; the Pauline churches wouldn't even exist without his gospel witness; but, once established as a community of believers, he was very concerned about the shape of that community – it was not anything goes, and specific traditions were to be taught and lived out in their common life together.

How often do we hear today: "I love Jesus but not the Church." Outsiders have some legitimate gripes with the church (which we've mentioned), but, we hear this on the lips of Christians too. Church bashing has become cool – and yes, the church needs to be critiqued – it must always be under the microscope of the Word of God. But, this idea that I can love Jesus and scorn the church is not biblical, in fact, it is heretical. This is the ancient Donatist error in all its misguided glory. The 4th C.

Donatists declared: “We love Jesus but we despise this church that compromised with persecutors” – to which St. Augustine replied: “you cannot say you love the head of the church but hate his body, the head and body are never separated.” Donatist arguments were lame in the early church and they’re still lame. One cannot say I love Christ, but I don’t care too much for his bride. This sub-Christian attitude is as old as the NT. In the first epistle of John we read: “If someone says, ‘I love God’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother who he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.” (1 Jn. 4:20). Loving Christ’s family is not easy because they are messy; we should know this, we are messy too. We are his sheep and he is our shepherd. If you’re a sheep you’re in the fold, it is as simple as that.

The entire Pauline corpus is about how to be the church. It is an elaborate doctrine of the church with explicit details about how we are to practice the faith in community. The church living in community is all about commitment. Much of evangelicalism has neglected biblical teaching on the church and we are suffering the consequences in terms of an evangelicalism that is too often miles wide but only inches deep. There is no greater example, in my thinking, than in our compromises on church membership. I had a pastor in my office last week who said he wasn’t sure about the NT teaching on church membership. This is a real practical issue because there are those who don’t want to make membership commitments. Pastors have to be pragmatic, but, that is quite different from trying to reinterpret the NT to fit our needs. Just because the words “church membership” aren’t found in NT doesn’t mean the concept is not there. One could say the same thing about the word “Trinity” – it’s not in the Bible but we believe the idea is clearly present.

There is a reason why the Christian tradition for 2,000 years has interpreted the Bible as teaching the absolute necessity of being committed to a local body of Christ and being in submission to church shepherds who are responsible for your feeding, care and correction. Yes, we’re members of the invisible church but that reality must have a visible expression in this earth – that has always been Christian teaching without exception. The notion that you can be a “regular attender” of a local church *indefinitely* without submitting to local church leadership is selling out to radical American individualism. I’m not talking about “inquirers,” I’m talking about those who have crossed the line of faith but resist church membership. This is where the gospel challenges our cultural values – Americans want to keep their options open; they don’t want anyone holding them accountable; besides, “I might decide I like another preacher better.” Christianity is all about submission; when one resists submission to Christ’s leaders in His church, it tells you something about the nature of one’s submission to Christ. I know challenging people on this is tough, folks aren’t going to like it; but last time I checked, exhorting folks to commitment to Christ and his Church is part of your job description as shepherds of God’s flock. People are short-circuiting their spiritual lives and we’re not doing them any favors by not telling them the truth.

This aversion to church membership among some Evangelicals is symptomatic of the larger issue of Christians being conformed to the world rather than conformed to Christ. The “outsiders” (Mosaics and Busters) see through the hypocrisy when Christians live like the faith is all about their own personal peace and affluence. God’s Word is clear – it is not about *you* and it’s not about *me* – it is about *us* and it is about *Him*. American Christians have fallen prey to the syncretism that Newbigin warned about. This me, me, me-centered attitude is very American but it’s not Christian. Self-

centeredness prevents us from being missional because we're so focused on our needs rather than the needs of others – whether those in the world or in the body of Christ.

Don Posterski in his book *Reinventing Evangelism: New Strategies for Presenting Christ in Today's World*, notes that instead of being “in the world but not of the world” the America church has done the seeming impossible and inverted Jesus' word's to become “of the world but not in the world.” This is scary but if we'll take a long look in the mirror, this is not blowing smoke.

Elder statesman of the Evangelical movement, John Stott has observed: “If we belong to Jesus Christ, we have a double calling in relation to the world. On the one hand, we are to live, serve, and witness in the world and not try to escape from it. On the other hand, we are to avoid being contaminated by the world. . . . Escapism and conformism are both forbidden to us. . . . Here then is God's call to a radical discipleship, to a radical non-conformism to the surrounding culture. It is a call to develop a Christian counterculture. The followers of Jesus, for example, are not to give in to pluralism, which denies the uniqueness and lordship of Jesus, nor be sucked into materialism or become led astray into ethical relativism, which says there are no moral absolutes. This is God's call to his people to be different.” When we live authentic Christian lives (radical lives of discipleship) then outsiders may notice that perhaps we not as hypocritical as they once thought. Perceptions of Christianity can change but there must be some lifestyle evidence.

Our doctrine of the church must be radically biblical; only if this is true, will we be clear about authentic community. We must not conform to the world and we must be committed to living in the world. It's not about what's comfortable, it's about sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom. Our connectional understanding of the church is so important at this point. Are we really responsible for one another's well being? Yes, we are. The NT is full of the connectional element – the church in Palestine sending out Christian leaders to Greek Churches to build them up in the faith; Greek churches taking up collections to help the poor churches in Palestine; problems in the Gentile churches referred to church leaders in Jerusalem to resolve the difficulties; apostles traveling and keeping tabs on all the churches. Autonomous churches are a modern invention – it is not scriptural and it has certainly not been the historic practice of the Church.

The importance of connectionalism was poignantly driven home to me a few years ago during the pastoral failure that transpired at Warehouse 242. Now, I had been a distant admirer of Warehouse for a long time. Their innovative missional ministry had been a blessing to many and it was devastating to all of us when this vibrant church hit the wall. When the melt-down began at W242, our Stated Clerk gave me a call and asked me to look into it – at that time, I was the only person on the ministerial committee who lived in Charlotte, so I became the elect one. Church discipline is nasty business and honestly, this was about the last thing I wanted to be involved with. It got really messy, and as typically happens, everything was not always handled perfectly – but I'll tell you, we got to see the body of Christ in action.

Here's what I witnessed: I saw a session try to pursue a godly course of action in the most difficult of circumstances; I saw ministry to the broken-hearted taking place; I witnessed a fellowship come face to face with the destructiveness of sexual sin (which was a warning to everyone); I saw a

church submit to the leadership of Presbytery that came alongside them; and I witnessed young believers experiencing firsthand that this church thing is the real deal. Anyone involved in that situation that didn't come out of it with a deeper understanding of the nature of the church, must have been hibernating.

Reflecting on that experience, I see it as an illustration of the missional and traditional working hand in hand. Here we had one of our cutting-edge missional churches run head-long into traditional Presbyterian polity – it wasn't foolproof (life never is) but it worked by God's grace. Brothers and sisters we need each other in this presbytery – we need the missional and the traditional – the two keep us in balance. I believe what holds us together is our ecclesiology (our beliefs about the church) – we have vowed to support each other, to hold each other accountable and most importantly we have committed to love one another regardless of the sacrifices we must make for the sake of others. Next time you hear a believer trashing the church, you tell them to talk to Jesus about that – because they are talking about His bride.