

Chapter 9

The Danger of Traditionalism

One of the phrases often attributed to Jesus is that he came to bring life in abundance to everyone. This intention is certainly backed up when we consider the stories and circumstances surrounding his life. There were many occasions when others came to him to complain about his words and actions. Jesus did not always seem to abide by the established traditions of his day, especially the ones that were on the verge of becoming examples of traditionalism. Jesus would rise above these nay sayers by pointing to a higher authority or larger vision of life and well-being. To his critics' dismay, he would move forward to encourage and to heal, establishing the intention of God toward wholeness for all humankind.

In most cases, a tradition enables; traditionalism, far too often disables or may even bring death. While some who leaned toward traditionalism may have considered Jesus a heretic, he tried to declare his intention toward life. His emphasis was on the love of God and the power of that love to bring everyone into a living relationship with God and with others. Traditions may evolve from our interactions with friends and family, but traditions are hardly ever the cause or the glue that holds friendships together. When a friendship begins to depend on habits or traditions, you will notice a loss in the intensity and depth of that relationship. I would further assert that when habits or traditions turn into traditionalism, it is impossible for personal relationships to have depth, and the possibility for vitality and spontaneity is completely gone.

The magic of what God intends for us and what Jesus' ministry envisioned is based on love, an inward and invisible grace that brings forth outward and visible results. The Sacraments, when appropriately celebrated in community, become a small picture to enable us to grasp the

depth and fullness of this living reality in our human existence. Worship sets the stage and opens the doors to the probability of our going forth from the gathered community to experience this lifestyle on a daily basis. Each of us, therefore, must determine how often we need this gathering to maintain our focus and encouragement to continue to live daily in the abundance of God's grace. This is why worship is so necessary in our lives. It is extremely important that we gather on a regular basis with others to acknowledge that God is the source of our life. We cannot live well without coming together to feed from God's holy table on all the resources we need to grow and prosper. We need to be continually empowered and reminded to share our gifts and resources with our neighbors. To neglect this invitation and celebration only causes us to lack what God and others can bring to us.

While every community may develop forms or traditions that constitute a basic framework for their worship, these traditions must remain flexible. If any tradition becomes so important it becomes the focus, rather than enabling those gathered to enter a life-giving experience with God and the others gathered, that tradition no longer brings life. When a leader—or anyone in the community—begins to maintain a tradition because it is a tradition, then it becomes traditionalism. When this primary position is given to any tradition it clearly becomes idolatry. The worship of the way one worships becomes greater than God, who alone should be primary. When this happens, no matter in what church or denomination, we sense that the community is dead. This is why I said earlier that traditionalism far too often disables or even brings death.

The danger of death is not only to the community. An individual caught in the net of traditionalism may also face death. The experience of death can be incomplete or complete. An incomplete death is the more usual experience. This is when a person's mind or spirit is affected but they do not experience an actual physical death. If the pain created in the mind or spirit is sufficient, that person may actually take their life in an action we call suicide. Unfortunately there are too many of these happenings year after year. You may be aware of someone who was so devastated by his or her life circumstances.

Unfortunately, my mother was affected in this way. It took many years of emotional and physical illness, but it happened. I am including my observations regarding her sad demise because they illustrate my experience of how devastating traditionalism can be in a person's life. Her pain was a strong influence for change in my life. It was a hard lesson that took a long time to analyze and filter, but it was one of the most significant moments in my movement toward an abundant life for myself. I will be brief, but I hope to bring a sufficient summary of what I learned to make a very important point.

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In my earlier years my mother seemed bright and cheerful. She was busy caring for my sister and me and, of course, for my father. Her talents were many and varied. Whatever she did she did well. She did nothing halfheartedly. Our home was always kept clean and neat. She not only prepared all our meals, but she made a lot of our clothes and the decorations for our home. She was able to make drapes, recover chairs, upholster, make rugs, and even paint and wallpaper. Her interests and activities extended beyond our home and family to our church and community. She loved people and enjoyed doing things with them and for them. Both my father and my mother were engaged actively in the wider community, and this brought us into contact with many people. This was in addition to our being an integral part of a large family on my father's side and a modest-sized family on my mother's side. It was a wonderful and enriching experience for my sister and me. My mother and father were wonderful parents, and I am extremely grateful to have been born to them.

As I was growing older, especially during my years in high school, I began to realize that my mother had dreams of her own; dreams that present traditions would not allow and could not bless. There were several dreams, but the most vivid was to use her vocal abilities in a professional way. For years she took voice lessons, even while I was in grammar school. Her dream was to eventually sing in the opera. As I was growing up, I would accompany her on the piano or organ. She was popular as a soloist and was invited to sing in many churches and on religious occasions. She sang on radio and television and probably never said no to any opportunity she was given, but she knew when she had to say no.

Our traditions held her back and prevented her from becoming what she might have been. We were very religious, and our religious faith was very narrowing and confining. In addition, it was not a time when most mothers would be found working or actively involved in a professional career. In spite of my mother's aspirations, she was given no encouragement. In fact, there were strong male figures in our family who strongly discouraged her from following her dreams. Religious inhibitions and the cultural climate of our family were strong deterrents.

The third factor that, I believe, brought about her demise was an unfortunate physical problem with her back. After a long search for a solution, she underwent an operation for a fusion of the spine. At the time this was a rather risky operation, but there appeared to be no other solution for her extreme pain and deterioration. It was also determined, probably too late, that medications during and after her surgery were doing her more harm than good. This added burden began to wear on her spirit.

In the midst of this physical pain, her father added an additional level to her pain. My mother was his oldest child and, while I am sure he loved her very much, he always held her and her family to a higher standard. My

grandfather was an Assemblies of God minister who was very conservative in his thoughts and ways. Like most religious people, however, his preaching did not always coincide with his life-style. While he fervently preached against television, he would watch it in our home each Monday when he visited us on his day off. While my mother was in the hospital recovering from her spinal operation, he explained to her that God might have healed her if she had been a stricter mother and more careful to exclude unwholesome activities such as television from our home.

Many traditions of that nature had become traditionalism in the minds and hearts of too many of our close relatives. As times changed, they could not change at all. Today when I mingle with members of similar churches, I am amazed at how open and progressive they have become. By today's standards they are still quite conservative, but they have learned to let go of many of the former traditionalisms of my day.

The sad day came in September of 1966, when I was called home to find that my mother had taken her life. She had threatened it many times, but we never thought it would happen. In addition to our grief, we had to struggle with the fact that many in our circle believed that those who took their own lives were surely doomed for eternity. Some churches would not even allow them to be buried with the blessings of the church. I had a lot to think about and I did a lot of thinking.

I am certainly not blaming my mother's death simply on the oppression imposed by traditionalism. There were obviously many factors involved, which is true when anyone commits suicide. Life is usually complicated, but one might expect one's religious community to be a source of hope and encouragement, not of oppression and condemnation.

During this time, I too was going through some inward turmoil. While I never thought of taking my own life, I knew some people in similar circumstances who had tried to take their lives. I was struggling with the fact that I was a homosexual. This was, to say the least, not a happy thought or feeling for one who was born in an Italian Pentecostal family, and it caused me a lot of personal tension and anguish. While times have changed and there is now some acceptance for us today, this was almost forty years ago, and the climate for any tolerance was dangerously poor. I cannot even begin to find the words to express how alone and devastated I was at the time. I literally had no one to talk to about this problem.

I am still amazed that anyone would begin to believe that someone would ever "choose," as they say, this life-style. I can assure you that it is not a choice; it is simply a fact of life. Without going into detail, I can tell you that I did everything one could at the time to try to be a heterosexual. Even though, at the time, homosexuality was on a list of sicknesses compiled by the medical world, I knew I had more than a sickness. As I eventually have come to understand, I did not choose to be gay. I did not

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wake up one morning and decide to be gay any more than heterosexual people wake up one morning and decide to be straight. I did not then, nor have I ever, traveled with people or to places where I had any contact with homosexuals. There was no chance that I was coerced or converted to a life-style. I grew up in a very strict religious world and was very active in the church all my life. My homosexuality was something that was a part of me from an early age; something I now had to learn to live with and accept.

I do not wish to get off the subject by spending a lot of time talking about my growing up and coming to terms with whom I am. Many good books and intelligent studies can do this much better than I can. I wish I had the words to tell you how God spoke to me through many people and on many occasions to let me know how much I was loved, just the way God made me. The main point I wish to make here is that my religious experience was not a life-giving experience; it was more like a death sentence. The traditionalism that is still prevalent today among many churches could have led to my demise. In plain English, it was a killer!

I remember that those who held strong views about anything they believed to be opposed to Scripture would often quote a verse from Hebrews, which said that the word of God was quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword. They seemed to delight in using Scripture as if it were a sword to cut people like me to pieces. They seemed to be more interested in maintaining purity of doctrine than the well-being of people. They seemed to be unfamiliar with the fact that Scripture's reference to the Word of God was to Jesus Christ, not to the written words. In spite of the many stories in which Jesus was kind to people whom religious leaders would consider enemies, they preferred to believe that Jesus would have cast out the evil that, from their point of view, possessed people like me.

Psychiatry notes that people who try to take their lives are, more often than not, crying out in a desperate way for help, but people in religious traditionalism simply discount this as a worldly theory. Homosexuality has been removed from Psychiatric Association lists of illnesses, but people in religious traditionalism simply discount this as a theory against the will of God. Even though there is no record in the Gospels that Jesus ever said anything about this (though the writings of Paul written soon after Jesus' death speaks about it), they grab a verse from wherever they can to make it the most terrible of sexual sins. Even though the context surrounding verses they do cite have changed in meaning and interpretation over the years, religious traditionalist maintain the correctness of a former tradition.

It is not uncommon for traditionalists to use a popular phrase in Scripture that claims people can be known or judged by their fruits. I have been in the ordained ministry for over thirty-five years, and I would like

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them to look at the fruits of my ministry. Even though I can testify that God has blessed me over and over again in my ministry, and even though the evidence may back up what I say, they will tend to do their best to diminish or absolutely denigrate what they hear and see. These people continue to use their sharp swords to choose and lift from the Scriptures, and in doing so, they kill and wipe out what God has made and used from generation to generation. Some people today believe we should re-establish the temple in Jerusalem and again offer animal sacrifices as the proper worship of God, even though many stories and words in Scripture tell us God does not desire this. Religious traditionalists cannot be persuaded, even though so many more of God's people have seen the light. They claim, as some did in the near past, to be the "moral majority" when they are not necessarily more moral than others, and they were certainly never a majority.