

History, the Arts, and Culture

by Gregory Wilbur

Conservatives and Moderns share the same vision of ignoring history for the sake of exalting a single moment in time at the expense of all others. – Sir Richard Sherbourne

There are three major philosophies of history which have implications for a biblical approach to the arts. People tend to be modernists, conservatives, or what I will term contemporary/traditionalists. There is a decided difference between being modern and being contemporary. Modern insinuates a spirit of the age as well as being fashionable and cutting edge. Contemporary literally means with time. A biblical view of the arts ought to encourage artists to be contemporary – meaning that they execute their art with an understanding of the past but in an idiom which reflects the time in which God has placed them in history. In order for this to not be misunderstood, the emphasis on contemporary needs to be placed on the aspect of understanding the past, or to put it biblically, the great clouds of witnesses that have gone before.

Recent history has taught the Church to look skeptically at the term and movement of modernism; however, the tendency of the Modernist is very apparent in many spheres of religious life. The Modernist is one who seeks to replace the past by tearing down what exists from the past and rebuilding with something new (i.e., revolutionary). While analyzing G.K. Chesterton's comments on this very issue in *The Christian Imagination*, Thomas C. Peters writes that "the progressive always assumes that change is for the better. This doctrine is an essentially self-congratulatory one, in that whatever we happen to be doing at the present time is deemed superior to everything that was done in the past. In the arts this idea leads to novelty for novelty's sake and to a necessarily negative opinion on anything conventional."

The conservative view of history resides in a desire to restore that which is past with a return to the "good ol' days" of a former era whether it be Medieval, the Antebellum American South, or any other epoch of history regarded as better than our own. This is a view towards the past as a substitute for the present.

The balance of these two ideas is the contemporary/traditionalist (i.e., reformational). Adherents to this view desire to learn lessons from the past, live in the present, and plan for the future. This is regarded as a moral philosophy approach to history. Study the past with a view of learning moral lessons which will instruct and be applied to the development of future leaders. This is, of course, a much more difficult approach as it requires wisdom and discernment in order to make application as well as a great deal of time and effort. It is also a synthesis of the ideas of both other schools as it includes the biblical mandate for creating while respecting the past. Notice that this understanding of *contemporary* is different from the normal misuse as a synonym for modern (i.e., relevance), and while tradition without understanding can indeed be dead orthodoxy, with understanding it is a glorious expression of the gospel.

The impulses of the Modernist and the Conservative lead to the same errors as aptly put by Sir Richard Sherbourne. To concentrate on a specific era of history to the exclusion of all others is a myopic understanding of the Church as the Bride of Christ throughout all time. It is just as narrow to want to sing Bach all the time as it is to only sing what has been written in the past twenty years. H.R. Rookmaaker in *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* talks about the idea of each generation bringing the truth of the gospel to bear in their own times. This is the essence of being contemporary. Unfortunately, the idea of being contemporary has been confused with the modernist approach to replace the past. A true contemporary

understands the past and seeks to incorporate his understanding and achievements to current endeavors with a desire to be just as permanent and excellent.

T.S. Eliot in his essay on *Christianity and Culture* talks about the idea that tradition is the democracy of the dead. Allowing the past to comment and influence direction is part of the great cloud of witnesses of those who have gone before us in the faith. To ignore the past is dangerous; to create without regard to the past is denying the gospel throughout time. Chesterton wrote, "I mean that modern men are not familiar with the rational arguments for tradition; but they are familiar, and wearily familiar, with the rational arguments for change . . . the whole modern world is verbally prepared to regard the new artist as right and the old artist as wrong. It is prepared to do so by the whole progressive philosophy; which is often rather a phraseology than a philosophy." Protestants who jump from Augustine to Martin Luther as favorite Church theologians miss a millennium of Church life, music, art, theology, and thought. We should not promiscuously embrace all of the past, but our theology, art, and culture are anemic, stilted, and myopic without it.

We should not seek to write music just like Bach and the baroque era in which he lived; but we should understand his attention to detail, his search for excellence, his exquisite craftsmanship, the influence of theology on his compositions, and his deep desire to glorify God and apply that to music in our own time. We should not seek to build Gothic cathedrals, but we should understand the theology of architecture and its ability to speak of God's transcendence and man's need, the idea of permanence and multi-generational endeavors, the sacrifice of community, the attention to craftsmanship in the most minute detail, and the desire to glorify God by offering our best and apply that to church architecture of our own time. The best art transcends the time in which it was written or executed – which is another distinction between that which is modern or contemporary.

The existence of a biblical standard of beauty and excellence as it applies to the arts does not necessarily mean that it is always easy to apply. The job of the contemporary/traditionalist is a difficult balancing act; however, it is not just the balance of old and new. It is the utilization of the past for the sake of the present and the future.

As all of this applies to the arts, it also applies to the manner and substance of our teaching. It is very easy to react to what we see happening around us and seek to combat it; however, often a direct rebuttal of a cultural idiom results in the use of the same revolutionary tactics which we should philosophically oppose. Reformation, and not revolution, is the means and the end of true cultural understanding and change. Reforming culture as a contemporary/traditionalist takes time, but it respects the gift of history and provides a far more substantive base and richer heritage with which to create a legacy for successive generations.

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