

Of Whose Spirit Are We? A Primer on Why We Seek to Retrieve the Great Tradition for the City Church

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Rev. Dr. Don L. Davis, February 7, 2007

In the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, the Kingdom of God has come to earth. As our Lord and Messiah, he has set his people free from the oppression of the devil, the condemnation of the Law, and the power of sin and death. Because of this freedom Christ granted to the people of God, we may now explore and employ different forms of worship and service to God in the Church, provided of course that we remain faithful to the Gospel and well anchored in the apostolic tradition as expressed in the holy Scriptures.

Throughout the history of the Church, Christians have expressed their liberty in Jesus to change, transform, abridge, or edit their respective structures, norms, and practices. Such freedom has been confirmed on the basis of the consent of the churches and their duly commissioned leaders, and always with a view to glorify God in Christ. These expressions, whenever valid, have sought to recover in richer expression our full Christian heritage as guided by the Holy Spirit. Truly, our liberty in Christ permits us to follow our consciences as we express our worship and service in ways consistent with Scripture, as well as the cultures of the peoples who follow Christ in obedience. This free expression and embodiment of Christ in culture is essential when members of a people group confess and obey Christ as Lord of all. No generation of believers is free to alter the message of the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God; that message is fixed and unchanging. However, we also gladly affirm that our evangelical identity allows and demands that we do all we can to give full and fresh expression to the meaning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the context of our culture and community.

Today, the contemporary evangelical church finds itself situated in an age of postmodernism, civil religion, hedonism, pragmatism, and egocentrism, all of which (to some degree) have influenced the worship and service of the body of Christ. These challenges call for a new discovery and reappropriation of the faith once for all delivered to the people of God. To meet these threats and to take advantage of our present opportunities, we must seek to be transformed,



Rev. Dr. Don L. Davis, (Ph.D., U of Iowa) is the Director of World Impact's Urban Ministry Institute. He also serves as World Impact's Vice President of Leadership Development.

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renewed, and enlarged by the Christian Story in order to give truer witness to Christ and his kingdom reign.

One of the richest sources for transformation and a renewed faith and discipleship lies in our retrieval of the Great Tradition, i.e., those doctrines, practices, and structures employed by the ancient Church as it sought to give expression to the truth concerning Jesus Christ. The ancient Church's faith and practice serves as the authoritative source of all of our various Christian denominational practices. In terms of time, the Great Tradition can be measured from the period between the time of Christ and the middle of fifth century. This "tradition lying behind all particular Christian expressions" sought to faithfully articulate, express, and defend the apostolic tradition in its worship, teaching, and experience. The Great Tradition predates all specific associational and denominational emphases, and represents the foundation of all valid contemporary Christian thought and practice.

As a church passionately invigorated by the presence of the risen Christ, the ancient Church endured the challenges of schism, heresy, paganism, imperial domination, societal immorality, and Gnostic deception. The early Christians articulated a faith that summarized and defended the apostles' teaching, and established structures of worship that led its members (many of whom were poor and oppressed) into a living hope and presence of Christ. Governing themselves according to a councillor vision of leaders who swore allegiance to the Lord Jesus, the ancient Church defined spirituality in terms of the people of God reliving, reenacting, and embodying the life and work of Jesus in the baptism into Christ (*catechumenate*), the rhythm of the Lord's Day celebration, practice of the Christian year, and a shared spirituality held in common among the churches. Rather than succumbing to societal pressure, these believers lived a faith that enabled them to represent nobly the Kingdom of God in their time, and lay a foundation and example for us to follow today.

Because of this, we are convinced that a critical retrieval of the Great Tradition can enhance our ability today to bear witness to the Kingdom in a troubled and lost society. Our retrieval of the tradition does not naively assert that the early Church was without fault, nor do we advocate a nostalgic return to do what they did in an ape-ish and unthinking fashion. Our time is *our time*; rather, we seek to learn from the Great Tradition in order to meet *our* challenges in *this* pressing hour. I am convinced that the rediscovery of this tradition can empower urban leaders and their congregations to withstand the temptations of our time, and help them to maintain hope and courage in the face of societal and spiritual evil. Above all, embracing the Great Tradition can enable all of us who love Christ to reconnect with the historic origins of our faith, and be transformed again by returning to the sacred roots of our spiritual source—the apostolic tradition canonically informed by the Scripture, climaxing in the glorious person and work of our risen Lord Jesus. Retrieving the Great Tradition can empower us to affirm our past, live courageously in our present, and anticipate our future and the coming reign of God in Christ.

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