

Christian Horses for Courses

East Window, March 2001

Christian Mission has always struggled with the problem of how far it is right to hold fast to tradition or how much we should be prepared to bend with the current culture.

The traditionalist would argue that the truth is clear, having been handed down to us by our ancestors in the faith. Those who wish to alter those traditions must therefore be very sure of their ground before having the temerity to deviate from them. "Jesus, the same yesterday, today and forever."

The modernists on the other hand would argue that God is not just to be found in things of the past but truth is being revealed through God's engagement with the world today. We should not be tethered to where God's people were in the past, but be open to God's new life. "Behold, I make all things new."

Are modernists being arrogant, seeking to put their own notions of truth above what inspired sages and Christian leaders of yore have found to be sacred? Or do traditionalists just have too little faith, not being prepared to let go of yesteryear and trust to the God of new things?

Some traditionalists may abhor modern Church practice, criticise the integrity of liberating theology, and believe with the New Testament that women should not speak in Church. Modernists may think venerating antique notions of holiness and staying with an all-male episcopate are just quaintly out of touch. And so it goes on.

But while traditionalists sit tight and modernists strain forward, most Christians I suspect want a good Anglican compromise. They want the best of both.

There was a similar problem in the early Church. St Peter came down from old traditionalist Jerusalem to visit St Paul in the modern city of Antioch. At first he agreed with St Paul's 'modernist' ideas and ate with men who had not had traditionalist circumcision. But when some traditionalist friends came to stay he refused to eat at the same table as uncircumcised Christians. St Paul was aghast.

St Paul's answer may help us today, for he felt that whilst the traditionalist approach could work for old Jerusalem, in the mission field of the Greek cities he would need modern ways into the Gospel for a new culture. However, at the same time he asked the modern congregations to give very generously into a common fund that would be shared with those who were in the most needy traditionalist congregations. In that way he found a symbolic way to bind both sides together in love and in practical care.

Whatever we call ourselves, modernist, traditionalist or whatever, we must read the culture we are working within and respond faithfully and appropriately to it for mission. But however we respond, never let our resulting differences blind us to our responsibility to care for one another and acknowledge that we are one communion. For as much as St Paul seems personally to have found traditionalists a problem, he still proclaimed that "we who are many are ONE, for we all share in one bread."

+Laurie Bradwell