

The Novelty Of The New

Proverbs 22:28 reads, “Do not remove the ancient boundary which your fathers have set.” The boundary or landmark (KJV) to which the writer refers was probably a property or tribal territory marker. However, folks are sometimes tempted to interpret and apply the injunction in a much broader way to include traditions related to spiritual matters. When a favorite way of doing some aspect of the service, or some long-held belief is challenged as being only “traditional” rather than “scripturally mandated,” the quick-draw retort is often to appeal to Proverbs 22:28, “Don’t remove the ancient landmarks!”

Landmarks are usually placed with deliberate intention and consideration. Such markers should not be removed ill-advisedly, or without due consideration of who placed them, and why they were put where they were. In other words, “Don’t remove old markers just because they’re not new.” Surely the wisdom of these words is easily discerned, so why make a big deal about it?

In every generation, or perhaps at least in every other one, there is a general rebellion against the “old” in favor of the “new.” This relates to more than just styles of hair and clothes. Younger folks are sometimes opposed to anything that has been around longer than they have, and are conversely in favor of anything that has come about in their own time (even if it is only being recycled from past generations). Thus, the novelty of the new is deemed favorable to the antiquity of the aged. “New” ways of doing “old” things are favored just because of the relative age of each. This generational desire for the novelty of the new is usually rebuffed by the members of the older generation in favor of the ancient landmarks of the past. But the truth is, either of these perspectives can be just as wrong as the other.

Without dismantling the proverbial admonition, the ancient should not be favored just because it is old any more than the new is to be rejected just because it is recent! The value of each must be measured by its merit. Any doctrine, or the practice of it, must stand or fall on the veracity of scriptural soundness. And, any way of doing something is only “sacred” when it is specified in the sacred text. A new way of doing something that is a matter of judgment (and therefore not mandated in the text) is not “wrong” or “bad” just because it is different any more than the old way was “right” or “good” just because it is “the way we’ve always done it.” However, caution should be exercised in both directions regarding these matters.

Holding tenaciously to the ancient ways just because they are “the way we’ve always done it” lends itself to some dangerous consequences. Perhaps the most obvious of these potential pitfalls is that we tend to make traditional matters of judgment or expediency into “law.” Thus, on which side of the communion table the bread is placed becomes all too important. Or, having one song, a prayer, two songs, the Lord’s Supper, and then the sermon becomes the only “right” way to order a worship service. No passage specifies any such things, and these types of tendencies need to be altered to remind us of that fact. Being unwilling to try something different or new that is itself acceptable according to the Scriptures, is arrogant in that it assumes there isn’t a better or

more conducive way to accomplish the needed objective. It thus lends itself to ritualistic repetition, stagnation, alienation, and isolation.

But on the other hand, an unquenchable thirst for the novelty of the new also has its own set of problems. For instance, having a dramatically different order of services every time the congregation meets can become confusing and a distraction to the overall purpose of the assembly, which is to worship. To desire a “change” just for change’s sake can ignore the possibility that there may be good and reasonable reasons why something has always been done a certain way.

Most of us are creatures of habit, which is not necessarily a bad thing, unless those habits become so entrenched in our thinking that we forget they are not “law.” Conversely, constantly desiring something “new” and “different” ignores the potential value of “tried and true.” The good news is that these two philosophies don’t have to be mutually exclusive. We don’t have to “change everything” to keep things fresh, and we don’t have to “leave everything just the way it is” to remain faithful either.

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