

“Maximizing Traditions of Faith”

A recent sermon on parenting offered excellent principles for Christian parenting and encouraged reflection. The minister pointed out how modernity works against efforts to raise our children to live faithful lives. He cautioned that “the goals of parenting do not come easily or naturally” in modern society. He warned that the world constantly pressures parents to substitute inferior goals. He emphasized the importance of “not giving children what they want but what is best for them.” The minister exhorted Christians “to maximize traditions of faith in our families in order to raise our children to be holy and faithful.”

These are timely and insightful reminders. Being a parent is very difficult in the modern world. While listening to the sermon, I was struck with how much it also applied to the church. The church is God’s assembled people, entrusted with embodying the Gospel in its corporate life and in the families and individual lives of its members. Like parents, modern churches are also constantly faced with complaints not unlike, “Why can’t we stay up and watch TV like the Wilsons?” Yet unlike parents, churches have difficulty saying, “Because you just can’t.” Or, “We don’t think its good for you—and we’re not the Wilsons!” Unlike children in our families, dissatisfied church members can go elsewhere if churches don’t offer what they want.

Still, churches, even more than families, are entrusted with—to borrow the minister’s phrase— “maximizing traditions of faith” in order to equip and enable younger brothers and sisters—and families—to live “holy and faithful lives.” In our “church families” also, “it doesn’t come easily or naturally” and “the world pressures us to substitute inferior goals.” This latter point has been well substantiated. For decades, countless voices have warned of the impact of TV on parishioners’ expectations for “church.” Basically this has meant “entertainment-oriented worship” crafted to “meet the needs” of generations raised on TV and movies and accustomed to being entertained. Quentin Schultze’s *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (1991), for example, pointed out that modern entertainment-oriented worship “submerges worship into popular culture” and “transforms congregations into audiences.”

Criticizing the State Church of Denmark in the 1840s, Soren Kierkegaard pointed out that the assembled congregation is not a gathering of spectators—not an audience. Rather, the congregation gathered to engage in holy worship is the drama; it is God who is the audience! Kierkegaard also observed that the church in his time had “out-miracled Jesus” by turning the wine back into water! It seems not inaccurate to observe that many modern American churches are attempting to turn the wine into Kool-Aid.

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