

# The Past is Never Dead

*By Ed Harrell (In Christianity Magazine, November, 1986)*

It was William Faulkner, I believe, who observed, “The past is never dead, it is not even past.” Look around and you will see that it is so.

I get an eerie feeling when I reflect on how much my words and actions are those of my father. It is perhaps an accident, but each time I view an old document with his signature on it, I think that the inscription would be accepted on one of my checks. And now, when my son Robert answers the telephone, people immediately begin conversations with me.

While all of us carry within us such a personal past, it is equally true that the corporate present which we share is permeated by the past. The word that describes that baggage is “tradition.” The rebel who thinks he lives outside tradition simply deludes himself – it is all around us. Religious people, it seems to me, should view tradition from two seemingly divergent perspectives, hoping to maintain a proper balance.

Tradition can be debilitating and mind-numbing – it can rob us of our intelligence and free will. D. W. Brogan reported the fervent confession of an early American who had just escaped being lynched by a patriotic mob: “I didn’t say I was against the Monroe Doctrine; I love the Monroe Doctrine, I would die for the Monroe Doctrine; I merely said I did not know what it was.” I once heard someone tell, facetiously I trust, of visiting a congregation that displayed a banner with the church’s slogan: “We Never Did It That Way Before.” If we do not recognize the source of what we inherit from our human past, we have no capacity to perceive that which is divine.

A mindless loyalty to tradition drew the Lord’s condemnation: “But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:9). Only the most presumptuous of human beings will fail to separate man’s traditions from God’s wisdom.

At the same time, one is at least equally arrogant who struts through life in defiance of the inherited wisdom of the past. Tradition is, after all, the accumulated understanding of the ages; the generation that discards it lightly will become lawless, without respect for family or society. Anthropologists tell us of primitive societies so ordered and governed by honored traditions that none would dare to break them. In some of these societies, the language contains no word for “disobedience.” Our times could profit from such a cordial deference to the past.

Of all people, Christians should honor the past. We are products of history; we stand upon the shoulders of scores of generations of pilgrims. The body of Christ is “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone” (Ephesians 2:20). We did not arrive at the present through our own valor and brilliance, but through the working out of God’s plan in history. The divine present is firmly based on the divine past.

If our divine past commands reverence, our human past deserves respect. The traditions I inherit are not law, but they are the best judgments of the elders who nurtured and taught me. They are the reverent reasonings of men and women who labored by day and studied Greek, logic and their Bibles by night; who themselves paid respect to generations of seekers before them. Help me

never to be so vain as to exalt my learning above that of every other age; protect me from a proud myopia which is blind to the thousands of years that produced me and sees only a present made superior by my presence.