

Is There Anything New Under The Sun?

We are all seized by novelty, the force that drives fashions and fads. All through the eras of history there have been innovations, in architecture and art, in engineering and machinery, in weaponry and tools; and in our own day we are going through the digital revolution, to mention one. So it is not readily apparent what the Preacher in Ecclesiastes means when he says that there is nothing new under the sun. To quote, “That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. So there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one might say, ‘See this, it is new’? Already it has existed for ages which were before us” (Eccl 1:9-10).

That Preacher was someone who had experimented with new fascinations, tried unfamiliar ways, and devised new things (ch. 2). So his conclusion is one that comes out of reflection, pertaining to human experience at the core. Sometimes when we look at humanity our focus is on what separates cultures. The more significant reality is what is common to all humanity. We can read ancient literature with appreciation precisely because the ancients were like us in regard to frailties and aspirations, in their search of meaning and purpose. So, in a very real sense, even though humanity is constantly inventing new schemes (7:29), there is nothing really new.

There are a few lessons here. The first is echoed in old adage, ‘History repeats itself,’ or its corollary, ‘Those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it.’ Wisdom tells us that certain courses of action have predictable outcomes. Many a calamitous scheme in human enterprise proceeded with the assumption, ‘It will be different this time,’ when the *modus operandi* was no different from earlier calamities. On the positive side, a commitment to prudence, wisdom, and righteousness bears its own good fruit.

The second lesson related to Ecclesiastes’ observation is especially germane for theological study. There is very little in the world of ideas that has not been batted about already in the centuries that have gone by, hardly any interpretation of a given passage of Scripture not previously considered. Every scholar who hits upon an idea faces the disappointment that someone seems to have written about it already. New ideas are often old ones in new garb. For instance, it is not that no one ever entertained the possibility that perhaps God does not know everything (on the contrary, the Bible attests to such thought—Isa 40:27), but that the idea was tested, especially within the framework of what is present in Scripture, and found wanting. It is not that no one ever experimented with church, or considered that Biblical patterns and instructions could use improvement. Just the opposite. The plethora of organizations that now dot the human landscape in the name of church, whether ancient and traditional, or modern and liberal, are all the outcomes of that. The study of theology and church history do acquaint us with past experiments in thought and practice. When we find insights, these are valuable not because they are totally new, but because they are new to us. And in the final analysis, despite all our longings for some new notion of ours improving upon what seems old and staid, our energy and industry are to be directed to discovering truth that dispels our false notions and embracing it wholeheartedly, for “the end of the matter” when “all has been heard” is “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is what is intended for every man” (12:13).