

The Value of Preserving Historical Memory

Bernie Gillespie

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Bio-ethicist Leon Kass¹ warns us that in the near future, pharmaceuticals will exist that will enable a person to edit their memories in order to achieve happiness. The advancing field of neuroscience is working to discover chemicals that will alter human memories. Society will welcome this drug as humane since it will relieve people of the pain of personally traumatic events. But Kass protests that any drug that interferes with memory formation, directly impacts character formation. Since one's identity is connected to one's memory, using such a drug transforms who one really is. In the process of remembering one's life, without the painful or negative parts, one produces *a different soul*.

My concern is not with the advancing ethical issues of biotechnology. My concern is with the historical memory of Oneness Pentecostals. It is disturbing how historical editors of the UPCI have interfered with its historical memories in order to shape the UPCI identity. As the present generation seeks to define its distinctiveness, it is tempted to redact its history in order to remove some of the painful, negative or unflattering facts, events, or persons, of the past.

More subtly, some distant or deeper roots are "forgotten" to make the past look like the present. Kass maintains that memory altering drugs would allow a person to uncouple past events from current emotions, so that the person is able to recall negative, even traumatic events *as though they really were not so bad or important*. Nonetheless, one does not need such a drug to alter one's memory. If the keepers of a group's history (even with good intentions) embellish the favorable memories over time, and little by little remove or marginalize the unfavorable memories, the character and identity of the group will change almost unconsciously. More than a few facts are being altered. The very identity, character, and soul of the movement are being made over.

We should expect any group to defend their group history against any attempts at revision by a malicious redactor (perceived or actual). It is only right for them to safeguard the character of the UPCI. Nevertheless, outside voices are needed to bring to consciousness those memories and voices from the UPCI past, which do not resonate with the present version of UPCI history.

The members of a group should challenge factual error and misrepresentations of their past. At the same time, it is incumbent upon the historians of any Christian group not to reject, out of hand, historical information that conflicts with present day conventions and traditionally accepted assumptions. Instead, they are responsible to preserve all their memories honestly, the acceptable and the *unacceptable*. It means to acknowledge and come to terms with elements of the past that challenge long-held customs, beliefs or

¹ Leon Kass, *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*, (Regan Books, December 1, 2003).

traditions, out of respect for the truth of history. They must hold the memories of their group in sacred trust. This means listening to voices from their past, which bring to light facts that dispute the present accepted “gallery of pictures” of their historical family album.