

The Changing Church: *It's Time to Change How We Think about Change*

It's a new year and time for a new focus in these newsletter articles. This year I will be writing about "The Changing Church." The focus will be on large changes that are happening in the church world. Each month I'll be highlighting one of these changes, its impact on the church, and some healthy ways to address it. I hope these articles will spur some dialogue within churches and between church leaders.

The first change to focus on is the one between the ears: *How we in the church think about change*. There are two common and unhealthy ways we think about change. First, we fear it. Socially and culturally we in the church tend to be a conservative people. Change bothers us. It makes us uncomfortable. We like things to stay the way they are or at least the way we think they are. Fear is probably the most common response to change within the church.

Second, sometimes we church leaders are too quick to jump on a bandwagon. We see a high-profile church that is doing a new thing and then we seize on that new thing as the solution for what ails our church. We then try to force the change on people who have no awareness of the new thing or any context for understanding why they need a new thing. The result is predictable.

We need to move away from fear and bandwagon-joining. We need to train ourselves to think about change in a biblical way. Here are some principles that will help us get started.

1. *All healthy change is grounded in what does not change*. This is actually the most important thing to know about change. It should calm our fears considerably. Nothing of eternal significance actually changes. The Lord Jesus Christ "is the same yesterday and today and forever," so we are not to be "led away by diverse and strange teachings" (Hebrews 13:8-9). If someone shows up at your church with a "new understanding" about Christ or the gospel, something that Christians haven't known or believed for a couple thousand years, then remove that person from the platform immediately. He is lying. There are no new Scriptures. There are no "secrets" about the Lord that are just now coming to light. "The faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) is quite well known. It's public record. Don't fall for any nonsense. Train yourself in solid doctrine. The church of Jesus Christ stands on that which is eternally unchanging.

2. *Change is built into the creation*. Nothing of eternal significance changes, but change is manifest everywhere in the temporal order. As the Preacher says, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Stuff is changing in this world all the time, which is why the attempt to base our happiness and find our purpose in something from the created order is "vanity and a striving after wind" (2:17). We are meant for the Creator. Our assignment is to exercise stewardship over his created order in a way that honors him, not to "camp out" at a certain point in the created order and attempt to make it permanent. Stewardship means that we recognize the changing nature of the temporal order and manage the change as best we can for God's glory.

3. *Our preferences become sinful when we insist on them.* There are certain things in this temporal order that I really like. There are practices and sounds that give me emotional joy. There are forms and structures that help me draw close to the Lord. There are cultural ways that I find comfortable. Problem is, these might not be the things that give you emotional joy or help you draw close to the Lord or that you find comfortable. Well, now we have a conundrum. It cannot possibly be that all the things I prefer are what everyone else prefers, yet here we are together in this organism called church where we are commanded to be “of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Philippians 2:2). It would seem that one of the reasons God creates us with preferences is that we might then honor him by surrendering them for something more important, which the Bible calls “the interests of others” (2:4). Don’t confuse your preferences with God’s eternal purposes.

4. *The Lord gives us leaders to ground us in what is unchanging and lead us through necessary changes.* Nothing of eternal significance changes, but we have all these changes in the temporal order and all these preferences that we must sort through in determining our course as a church. If that sounds to you like a potential mess, then you’re beginning to get the picture. Leadership and proper submission to authority are required in order for a church to navigate successfully through it. Good shepherds are God’s gift to his flock. They help us stay grounded in what is unchanging while we navigate change in the temporal order. One of the chief duties of a church member is to “obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Hebrews 13:17). Healthy processes are necessary for healthy change. The bigger the change, the more important the process. Good pastors ground their congregations in what is unchanging and guide them through processes that facilitate important decisions. You should thank God for your good pastor. He has a tough job. Do your best to make his work a joy.

Brothers and sisters, let’s change the way we think about change. Do not be fearful. Do not be quick to jump on bandwagons. Stay grounded in what does not change and accept the fact that change is inherent to the created order. Lay your preferences down at the altar. Trust the Lord to guide you through the leaders he has appointed. Be prayerful and do your part to help your church experience healthy change.