



“Is Your Church Changing?”

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It almost seems like the world is changing faster than ever before. Our culture is rapidly adapting to social standards and norms, and as it turns out, so are many churches. If it had been suggested twenty-five years ago that many mainstream denominations would be embracing some of the things they are today, we would've found that very hard to believe. The past ten years alone has seen the acceleration of doctrinal, moral, and philosophical change to the point of causing an upheaval in the religious world. What about *your* church? Is it changing with the times? Should it be? Should we expect the church to follow the lead of the culture around it? Does the church that you are a part of tolerate or practice things that a few years ago would've been soundly rejected by the leadership and the majority of the membership? Churches DO change.

II Peter 1:10-15 “Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Wherefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth. Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance; Knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath shewed me. Moreover I will endeavour that ye may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance.”

In this epistle, Peter is concerned about what will happen to the church after the death of he and the other apostles. He establishes their authority as apostles, saying that their word was the result of eyewitness testimony of Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In the very next chapter, he warns that false teachers would arise and lead the church astray. His concern for the moment was that the church be *established in the present truth* so it would not be led into heresy and apostasy.

That alone tells us that churches sometimes change. The apostles were concerned about that fact. We're not talking about incidental change, or merely cultural change. We're talking about foundational and doctrinal change and upheaval. Is *your* church one of the many who are caught up in the tidal wave of change today? That is the focus of this week's study.

It seems like nearly every day we hear of another religious leader or organization changing his/their position to be more in line with contemporary culture. Scriptural traditions or moral truths long held almost universally by professing Christians are being reconsidered and mostly abandoned in an effort to make the church more acceptable and appealing to the world. Churches are changing morally and doctrinally, and they're doing so at a dizzying pace.

Is *your* church abandoning its former stand against sin and evil? Is it becoming more liberal, loose, and worldly with each passing year? That should cause you to stop and think about some things. The winds of change are blowing—not only throughout the denominations, but even among the Lord's church and churches long associated with what is coined *The Restoration Movement*. Simple, Biblical worship is being replaced with showy, emotion-driven experiences that are patterned more after the latest trends in the denominational world than after the examples and teachings of the New Testament. Some have embraced practices that were always before rejected because of the appeal for Bible Authority. Things such as women preachers and elders, instrumental music, praise teams and bands, and so on. Congregations that no longer want to be known as a church of Christ, taking that description off of their signage even, in an attempt to disassociate themselves from their own past and assimilate to the wider religious community around them.

I received a message from a viewer in north Louisiana recently who named the church he had been a member of for some time, and he said they had not only "taken the designation "Church of Christ" off of their sign, but are now in the process of incorporating instrumental music into the worship in a slow but calculated process." I've heard from many over the last few years who report a similar story. Some churches of Christ have even abandoned the foundational teachings of the gospel plan of salvation and are adopting Calvinistic ideas about salvation, such as *salvation by faith only*--rejecting the necessity of baptism, and promoting charismatic and denominational ideas about the work and influence of the Holy Spirit in conversion and so forth. Are the winds of change blowing in the place you call home? Do you feel like an outsider in your own home congregation because all of the change has left you behind? You are certainly not alone and your circumstance is one that the Bible very much addresses.

But first, let me hasten to say that SOME change is good and even necessary. There are certainly some changes that we need to see within the church today. We need to see a change from indifference to zeal. How badly we need to see a change from worldliness to holiness. From carnality to spirituality, from spiritual ignorance to knowledge. I think all of us could agree with that. But these changes are not brought about by setting aside the Bible pattern for something new and perhaps emotionally appealing. Rather, they are brought about by the transformation that the gospel is able to affect within the heart. There are things that perhaps we need to change about how we broadcast and disseminate the gospel in the world today. The globe is now girdled by a network of instant mass communication so that we are presented with new and exciting avenues through which to proclaim the gospel. It's pretty obvious that simply being stuck in the 1950's and passing out a handbill advertising a yearly gospel meeting isn't the most effective way to spread the gospel today. Gospel meetings as we've coined them can be wonderful, but we're not going to reach the culture until we go to the culture and shine as a light of influence, taking the gospel to where people are today.

That is all very true. But what we must NOT do is change, compromise, or dilute the truth in an effort to attract a crowd. It is still the gospel that saves. It is still the doctrine of Christ in which we must abide. It is still the truth that sanctifies and unless people learn the truth, are convicted of their sins, turn in faith, repentance, and obedience to Jesus Christ and allow Him to change their lives, they are not going to be saved. And we're not doing anything to help them whether we get them to attend a service and swell our numbers or not.

As I stated, change is not necessarily wrong. In fact, it is sometimes healthy and desperately needed. But the need for change stops short of the doctrine and teachings of Christ and His apostles. Sacred truths and patterns in scripture cannot be cast aside and God be pleased with it.

II John 1:9 “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son.”

I Corinthians 11:2 “Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances (better translated as *traditions*), as I delivered them to you.”

So, why are so many churches in the throes of change today? Why, perhaps, is *your* church changing? Some churches change because they adopt a pragmatic view of church growth. This is the prime motivation in much of what we're seeing today. *Pragmatism* is the idea that the effectiveness of a practice or idea determines whether it is right or wrong, valid or invalid. In other words, if it works, then it must be right. If it draws a large crowd, then that is the way to go. The pragmatist doesn't ask *what saith the scriptures?* but rather, *what saith the majority? What is the world seeking? What will make the church most appealing to the masses or to the younger generation?*

The result is that we see churches operate like businesses, with a quota and a bottom line, and the measure of success becomes the size of the crowd, the social standing of the church in the community, the amount of money that it brings in, the popularity of its preacher, and so on. When a church turns to pragmatism as its model for growth, the first thing that is necessarily sacrificed is truth, because the reality is that truth itself is often very offensive to the world. Sinners don't like to be told that they're sinners.

John 3:20-21 “For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.”

So, the pragmatic church turns away from any kind of preaching or messaging that involves identifying and condemning sin. Friend, the gospel is certainly a popular message and it is to be preached in love, without a doubt. It is a message of love and entreaty, peace and salvation. But, make no mistake: it's also a message of change and repentance. A gospel that does not convict a man of sin and lead him to give up his sin and allow the Lord to change his life is no gospel at all. It is false doctrine. Churches are very misguided today who believe that they have to change the message of scripture to make it more palatable, more acceptable and easier to take for a lost and sinful world.

Secondly, sometimes churches change because they desire to be like the nations about them. For example, the restoration plea of the 19th century was a response to the sectarian model of the reformation. The appeal to *speak as the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent* was the call that rang out.

1 Peter 4:11 “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God...”

In other words, *let him speak as God has spoken*. That is a worthy plea and it is a scriptural and an apostolic plea. If we live up to it, the result is that we will be different from others about us. When human creeds and humanly devised practices and man-given names and so on fragmented the religious world into dozens of denominations and hundreds of sects and factions, the ideal of the restoration was to follow no creed but the Bible. To call Bible things by Bible names and do Bible things in Bible ways. Some people tell us that the Restoration plea has failed and I roundly reject that.

The Restoration plea made the churches of Christ different. It called people out of the error of sectarianism and denominationalism back to the truth of God’s word. But today, a significant part of that plea is being abandoned as congregations of the Lord’s church seek to be like the ‘exciting’ and growing religious groups around them.

Long ago after the aged prophet Samuel had made his sons to be judges over God’s people, this is what the scriptures say took place.

1 Samuel 8:4-8 “Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah, And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations. But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the LORD. And the LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt even unto this day, wherewith they have forsaken me, and served other gods, so do they also unto thee.”

They wanted a king so they could be like the nations around them. Not because it was God’s will, but because they envied and idolized the pagan nations around them, thinking their ways were better than God’s way. God told Samuel that in so doing, they were rejecting God’s own lordship over them. Friend, that’s what churches do today when they look to false religions as their model and their ideal instead of looking to the authority of the scriptures.

Thirdly, some churches change because they become ignorant of the scriptures.

Hosea 4:6 “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge...”

You know, when people aren’t familiar with the doctrines of the New Testament, they become easy prey for change agents and false teachings. That is why in so many pulpits today there is so little emphasis on theology and sound doctrine. Have you noticed that as a whole? I mean, there are some wonderful preachers in the world today who still preach the Bible and a *thus saith the Lord*. Their sermons delve deep into the truths of God’s word. But you also have to admit that much of what the world is hearing today, much of what people are trudging to church to hear from week to week is rubbish. It’s fluff. It’s shallow. It’s vain.

How many so-called sermons do you hear today that place a small emphasis on scripture and its exegesis? Little scripture is even quoted, but instead authors and psychologists are quoted, jokes and stories abound, theatrics and dramatism is used to illustrate some shallow and vapid social or moral

lesson. As a result, people are left spiritually starved and those churches are easily led in whichever direction by the winds of culture and change.

Ephesians 4:13-15 “Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:”

Carried about with every wind of doctrine, Paul says. That’s what we see today, but Paul says that’s not to be. Churches change because they become ignorant of sound Bible doctrine, and so often that is the fault of men who fill pulpits and the men who lead the flock.

Fourthly, when churches change it is because they are taking a lower view of scriptural authority. In other words, no longer is the Bible looked at as a pattern for the work and worship of the church. No longer do they seek a command or example from the scriptures to see if their practice is right in the eyes of God. Instead, they say *God has no pattern for how we are to worship. He just leaves it up to us to worship in whatever way emotionally or spiritually stimulates us.* They interpret plain statements in the scriptures in such a way as to explain them away and essentially make them meaningless to the modern church. Let me give you an example: The apostle Paul could not have written anything more plainly than when he wrote to the church in Corinth.

I Corinthians 14:34-35 “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.”

I know that teaching is not popular today. It’s not in line with what our modern culture says about what the role of women should be in the work of the church, the preaching of the gospel and so forth. But, friends, it IS what the Bible says. Paul was either an apostle or he wasn’t. He was either inspired of the Holy Spirit or he wasn’t. It takes a man with a host of seminary degrees to come in and try to explain that away. What else could Paul have said to express himself any more plainly? Yet, in an effort to accommodate our changing world, even brethren are now attempting to explain Paul’s words away. Will they explain them away when we are judged by the scriptures in the last days as Jesus said we will be? The silence of the scriptures used to be respected. Many churches once rejected instrumental music in worship because it is never commanded or authorized in the New Testament—and it’s not, by the way. Instead we’re told this:

Ephesians 5:19 “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord;”

Many churches have now decided that since the Bible doesn’t explicitly forbid instrumental music—in other words, it doesn’t say “Thou shalt not use an organ, a piano, etc. in the worship,”—then it should be employed in worship. Simply because it is not expressly or explicitly forbidden—despite the fact that the early church knew nothing of its use and it took six hundred years for it to be introduced, and that by the Roman Catholic church. But, you see, they’re adopting a new hermeneutic that says that as long as the Bible doesn’t specifically and plainly forbid it, then it must be alright to practice.

Friend, the Bible never tells us to play an instrument in worship to God in the church. The Bible tells us that we are to *sing and make melody in our hearts to the Lord (Ephesians 5:19)*. The Bible also says that we are to *sing with grace in our hearts unto the Lord (Colossians 3:16)*. History tells us that the early church offered vocal music unto the Lord. Instrumental music was unknown to the New Testament church, as I said, until some six hundred years after the church's establishment, when the Roman Catholic church introduced it.

When we adopt a hermeneutic that says "as long as the Bible doesn't expressly forbid something, it's okay to practice," you can see where this type of thinking leads. I just cited **I Corinthians 14:34** where the Bible expressly forbids women preachers. Yet, some of the same churches are ignoring *that* prohibition—even though the Bible does expressly forbid it. They are adopting women preachers. That ought to cause us all to pause and think about how we are interpreting the Bible and just how far we are willing to go. At what point do we stop saying *the Bible doesn't mean what it says*? At what point do we draw the line and say *No!* to practices that are not authorized by the scriptures? This was Paul's command:

Colossians 3:17 "And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of (or by the authority of) the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him."

In closing, I want to say this: you may be very concerned about what you're seeing in the church today. You may lament the many changes that are sweeping through the religious world. May I remind you that the winds of change have been blowing for a long, long time. The spirit of innovation was kindled a long time ago and some churches have been changing longer than you might realize. It's ironic that many are lamenting and complaining about the changes taking place NOW, but seemingly haven't been bothered by the change that has already led them away from the Bible pattern. Many churches fought instrumental music tooth and nail; others sought to introduce it. Yet, many of those same churches welcome the use of Sunday Schools and individual communion cups. Friend, there is no more scriptural authority for one than there is the other.

Is your church changing? Maybe it actually changed a long time ago. The question is, will you stand up for what is written or will you continue to drift with the tide of change? If so, how far will you let it carry you? How far will your church have to go before you say *I can't go along with that?* because the agents of change are never satisfied, you can mark that down. The spirit of innovation never reaches a point where it is enough. The very nature of apostasy and departure is to keep going. It's NEVER enough. Those who seek to drift away from the Bible never get to a point where they say *enough*. Change will simply continue.

I would appeal to you today in the words of the weeping prophet Jeremiah to wayward Israel so long ago:

Jeremiah 6:16 "Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls..."

But, you know what one of the saddest statements in all of the Bible is? The statement that follows Jeremiah's plea.

Jeremiah 6:16 "...But they said, We will not walk therein."

That's what the world is saying today: *we don't want the old paths*. The religious world, even some in the church today are saying *we don't want the old paths*. Will you stand with Jeremiah? *Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way...*What saith the scriptures? As God speaks, I'll speak. As God is silent, I'll be silent. Ask for the old paths and find rest for your souls.

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