

Week 2 – Uneasy About Change

Summary

As we strive to be an intentional congregation we will be exploring different ways that the church can operate more effectively to participate with God in His work of reconciliation. In this exploration there will be new ways of doing things and even new ways of thinking about things... all of which will inevitably lead to change. To one person one thing is a BIG change, while to someone else it is a SMALL change. Dealing with change as a church will require each of us to be willing to communicate, reflect, and study on various topics. The key question for each of us will be, “Am I willing to do things I don’t personally like for the sake of others?” As we examine the Bible’s teaching on the topic we will discover that the more we grow in faith the easier change is to handle.

Week 2 – Uneasy about Change

Some people are energized by change and others are disoriented by change. In some areas of life change is welcome while in areas such as our faith, change is often associated with being uncomfortable, a sense of danger and fear. I want to approach the topic of change from two perspectives. First there is the question of the different reasons for change. Second I want to examine the different responses to change.

Reasons for Change

❖ Language

Words and language are like little containers of meaning which change over time. The Bible was originally written in three ancient languages; Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. As word usage changes, our Bible translations change so that readers will understand what was meant by the original authors. Examples are the words “toil” and “spin” in Matthew 6:28. We no longer use the word “toil” for the idea of work nor do many people know that “spin” refers to spinning yarn or thread. In fact the word “spin” in our country has come to be associated with the political manipulation of language which obscures the whole truth. (other examples see 1 Sam 9:9) The language of church is constantly changing.

❖ Understanding

Another reason for changes in what the church teaches and practices is the result of improved understanding of what the Bible meant to the original authors and those to whom they wrote. Our understanding of ancient languages and cultures has grown exponentially over the past 40 years. We now understand that Biblical authors often used Greek words to communicate Semitic (Jewish) ideas. One significant word whose meaning is affected by this change is the word “righteousness.” The Greek concept carries the idea of being just and ethical. The Semitic concept of righteousness involves the idea of being faithful or trustworthy in a relationship. When God is said to be “righteous” it conveys the idea that he is a faithful and trustworthy covenant partner. Our understanding has also been impacted by increased understanding of ancient culture and rhetoric. It is important to keep passages in their context and understand the argument the author is making. Examples would include: Romans 7, Matthew 5, and Revelation 22.

❖ Effectiveness

Churches also change to be more effective in accomplishing the mission of the church in different settings. In different countries you will find differences in worship styles; differences in how the Lord’s Supper is shared, differences in the language of prayers, songs, etc. The effectiveness of church practice shifts with culture and cultural changes. Different words, songs, gestures and actions are all culturally based. Tent meetings and bus ministries have come and gone. Bowing and veils no long are used to signify honor. To reach people we do things to avoid being rejected on face value. Paul met Jews in Synagogues and quoted the Old Testament and met Greeks in the market and quoted Greek philosophers. Paul had Timothy circumcised before taking him on the missionary journeys (Acts 16:3) but refused to have Titus circumcised (Gal 2:3). Timothy’s Jewish background and lack of circumcision would have reduced Timothy’s effectiveness with the Jews.

❖ Preserve the gospel

Sometimes it becomes necessary to intentionally change what or how we do things as a church because we don’t want to distort the gospel. Repeating the same practice and the same language over a period of time creates a sense of what is orthodox, the way things must be done to be proper. Examples include – contribution following the Lord’s Supper, saying “in Jesus name” at the end of prayers. We must pay attention to those places where our patterned practices begin to calcify into an unintentional orthodoxy, because Paul warns us sharply in Galatians against the dangers of distorting the gospel message with our practices.

Responses to Change

Our response or reactions to change will vary from person to person because change is always relative; relative to what we have grown accustomed to and what we currently practice. While the changes that Paul and the Apostles were dealing with are not necessarily the same changes that we deal with, they provide a solid Scriptural framework for our thinking through changes in today's church. The dominant issue in the 1st Century church was the change in "righteousness" that coincided with the incorporation of Gentiles into God's kingdom.

Background

Christianity began as a Jewish movement. As the church expanded from Jerusalem the involvement of Gentiles grew. As Paul begins preaching to Gentiles the challenge of including Gentiles into God's kingdom becomes more challenging because of the Jewish idea of righteousness. Righteousness is *not* how a person enters a relationship with God, but how they maintain their status as a follower of God. For a Jew that meant following the Law and circumcision and following the Law involved remaining separate from Gentiles (see Acts 10). When Paul argued against following food laws, circumcision and Gentile association, he was violating what the Jews were "accustomed to until now" about righteousness. (See Galatians) Other Christians (primarily Gentiles) brought Stoic ascetic practices into the church and associated those with righteousness. (see 1 Cor 7, 8-10)

Faith and Conscience

In 1 Cor 8-10 Paul explores the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols. His argument goes something like this.

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| Fact | Idols are nothing because we know there is no god but God. |
| Caution | Some people have grown up believing in idols and so when they eat this meat they think it means something |
| Fact | Food does not bring us closer to God or farther away (interesting assertion for a Jew) |
| Conclusion | we are free to eat or not |
| Caution | Don't allow your freedom to hinder someone's progress in faith, because Christ died for the weak in faith |
| Conclusion | If your exercise of freedom wounds the faith-conscience of a weak brother... you sin. |
| Example | look at how I conduct my ministry, not using all of my freedom in Christ, instead I make myself a slave |
| Exhortation | run (live) in such a way as to get the prize because how you run and finish the race matters |
| Example | Not all of the Israelites reached the promised land |
| Caution | be careful about thinking you won't be tempted (to think the sacrifice means something?) |
| Example | Eating the Lord's supper is participating with God, so people associate meals with meaning |
| Conclusion | Don't participate in the Lord's Supper and the supper of idols also |
| Instruction | If offered meat, eat. If the host mentions the idol connection, don't eat. In either case eat thanking God |

This outline guides our understanding of how to deal with this situation in the church today. Different people consider different things "necessary" for proper Christian practice. The fact that they believe it has significance does not mean that it does, but their belief is sufficient cause to treat their belief as a valid belief, until they "know" better. Like meat sacrificed to idols, many of those beliefs arise from being accustomed to things. Another important passage on this topic is found in Romans 14:5-23 where Paul concludes with the idea "everything that does not come from faith is sin."

Different levels of "uneasy"

We get used to things being a certain way in church and the practices have religious meaning to us. When things are changed in church it makes us uneasy, but for different reasons. Some are uneasy because they have a preference for one way over another, some are uneasy because they feel it is "wrong." How do we deal with this?

If it is a matter of preference

- ❖ We attempt to abandon our wish for the sake of others
- ❖ If we can participate in good faith, then participate, if not do not feel compelled to participate

If it is a matter of something that challenges our faith-conscience:

- ❖ Recognize that just because something violates my faith-conscience that doesn't mean that it is wrong for everyone or for the church
- ❖ Participate in those aspects that don't violate our faith-conscience, for the sake of others
- ❖ Communicate to the leaders that you are challenged by the new practice
- ❖ Engage in study and prayer with others to resolve the challenge to your faith-conscience
- ❖ We don't want to force people to do things that violate their faith-conscience, but we also don't want our practice or teachings to communicate that the matter is always right or always wrong, unless it is.
- ❖ The things we do together are aimed at mutual edification.
- ❖ Place a higher regard for doing those things that edify those with little or no faith
- ❖ The stronger our faith becomes, the more useful we can be at reaching the lost.