

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #55: “CHANGE”

By John Temples

If someone comes along with:

- A new idea for making worship more meaningful;
- A new strategy for reaching the lost;
- A new explanation for a Bible passage;
- A new method of teaching Bible classes;
- Or a new translation of the Bible--

How do you react?

If you were to poll your friends and associates, which of these sets of terms would you expect or want them to say about you?

- Progressive...wise...up to date...innovative...open to new ideas
- Stuck in a rut...stubborn...a dinosaur...a troglodyte...old-fashioned

Most of us would like to think of ourselves as progressive, up to date, and open to new ideas. Advertisers know this; one of the most often-used words in advertising is *new*. People in Bible times were the same. Luke said of the people of Athens, “For all the Athenians and foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing” (Acts 17:21).

However, there is a big difference between *perception* and *reality*. There is a big difference in hearing or talking about some new thing and actually adopting or doing it. Many Athenians listened to Paul preach the gospel, but only a few of them became Christians.

Despite what we might think, it is human nature to resist change. Inertia is a very real entity, both physical and intellectual. Truth be told, we like to read about or hear about new things, but we are slow to change our routines or adopt different ways of thinking. One preacher said, “Do you know the Bible command most

widely obeyed by our brethren, especially on Sunday nights? It is 1 Corinthians 15:58--'Be steadfast and immovable.'"

People also resist cultural and technological change. Let me share with you some fascinating anecdotes from history:

Back in the early 1800s, some progressive individual proposed using gas lamps to light city streets. He was attacked, ridiculed, and criticized. One writer called the idea of gas lamps "the ravings of a madman." A newspaper editor published three objections to such a wild scheme:

- A medical objection: Emanations of gas are dangerous. Lighted streets would encourage people to remain outdoors, leading to increases in colds and other ailments.
- A moral objection: The fear of darkness will vanish and drunkenness and depravity will increase.
- A theological objection: Artificial illumination is an attempt to interfere with the divine plan for the world, which has ordained that it should be dark at night.

It is difficult to believe that such thinking was done. But history proves that whenever radical change is proposed, there is fierce resistance. Here is an excerpt from a sermon preached in Baltimore in 1896. The sermon topic: the recent rise in popularity of bicycles.

"These bladder-wheeled bicycles are diabolical devices of the demon of darkness. They are contrivances to trap the feet of the unwary and skin the nose of the innocent. They are full of guile and deceit. When you think you have broken one to ride and subdued its wild and satanic nature, behold, it bucketh you off in the road and teareth a great hole in your pants. Look not on the bike when it bloweth upon its wheels! For at the last, it bucketh like a bronco and hurteth like thunder. Who has skinned legs? Who has a bloody nose? Who has ripped breeches? They that dally along with the bicycle." (From *A Social History of Bicycles*.)

A few years ago, a newspaper reminded readers of reactions when indoor bathtubs were introduced. Preachers preached against them. Editorials in newspapers condemned them. Insurance companies threatened to cancel homeowner policies. Fortunate, though, enough sensible people went ahead and used bathtubs. (And rode bicycles, and lit streets.)

But don't get to thinking that shortsighted thinking was limited to those examples. Note these:

- “This ‘telephone’ has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication.” (From a Western Union internal memo, 1876.)
- “Everything that could possibly be invented has been invented.” (Statement attributed to a Commissioner of the US Patent Office, 1899.)
- In 1899, The Literary Digest magazine had this to say about automobiles: “The ordinary ‘horseless carriage’ is at present a luxury for the wealthy; and although its price will probably fall in the future, it will never, of course, come into as common use as the bicycle.’ Four years later, Detroit lawyer Horace Rackham was advised by the president of the Michigan Savings Bank that ‘the horse is here to stay but the automobile is only a novelty – a fad,’ before he bought stocks in Henry Ford’s Ford Motor Company.”
- David Sarnoff’s associates’ response to his urgings regarding radio in the 1920s: “The wireless music box has no imaginable commercial value. Who would pay for a message sent to nobody in particular?”
- In 1928, Joseph Schenck, President of United Artists, seemed confident about one thing: talking pictures were a fad. He told The New York Times that “talking doesn't belong in pictures.” Though he conceded that sound effects could be useful, he felt that dialogue was overrated. “I don't think people will want talking pictures long,” he said.
- Film producer Darryl Zanuck said of television in the 1940s, “People will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box every night.”
- When tractors were first invented, it was an uphill battle to get farmers to ditch their horses and buy them. One farmer said, “If tractors could reproduce themselves, like horses, they might have some value.”

- Statement from the chairman of IBM, 1943: “I think there is a world market for maybe five computers.”
- An engineer at IBM, commenting on the microchip in 1968, said: “But what is it good for?”
- In 1977, the founder and chairman of Digital Equipment Corporation is reported to have said: “There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home.”
- A principal at Decca Recording Company said in 1962: “We don’t like their sound, and guitar music is on its way out.” (He was speaking of the Beatles.)

And anybody remember saying, “Pay for water in a bottle? Ridiculous! Nobody would do that.”

The realm of religion is not immune to such inertia and shortsightedness. Here is a critique of a new Bible translation: “The late Bible...was sent to me to censure, which bred in me a sadness that will grieve me while I breathe, it is so ill done. Tell His Majesty that I had rather be rent in pieces by wild horses than any such translation by my consent should be urged on poor churches.... The new edition crosseth me. I [suggest] that it be burnt.” That was from a speech in the English House of Lords in 1611, criticizing the newly published King James Version.

So what’s the point? Let me make it clear: I am not advocating change in religion or any other area just for the sake of change. Some congregations hire a new preacher every two years, no matter what. That is foolish. There is no use to change the order of worship just to keep people guessing. And every Christian should object to some “new” thing that violates Scripture.

But if a new idea or invention can advance the Lord’s kingdom without compromising truth, we should embrace it. We live in an age of technology and an explosion of knowledge. We have computers, email, Internet, and cell phones. We can put an entire library in an electronic device the size of our hand. All this should be taken advantage of. But just be aware: if you take it upon yourself to introduce a new concept into the church, you do so at your peril. It is natural to resist change and preserve the status quo.

I've heard that many years ago, people objected to any kind of help in studying the Bible--no class materials, no commentaries, no visual aids. But thankfully, enough people saw the value of helps, and they saw that no principle of Scripture was being changed by their use. This was also true with regard to song books and pitch pipes. If you were around when individual communion cups were introduced, you remember some real battles. And how about when air conditioning was first installed in church buildings? (For some reason, it was all right to heat air, but sinful to cool it.)

And then there was the brother who was in a church business meeting when it was proposed to order a new chandelier for the church auditorium. His reaction was, "We don't need it. First of all, nobody can spell 'chandelier.' Second, even if we had one, nobody could play it; and third; what we really need in the auditorium is some light!"

The bottom line is this: The question should be, am I opposed to something new because it violates Scripture? If so, oppose it with all your might. But am I opposed just because it goes against the way I have always thought or done? Brethren, let us be careful not to adopt anything new that will alter the Bible message or violate any Scripture principle. But at the same time, let us not miss an opportunity to do the work of the Lord more efficiently, to proclaim the message in a more understandable way, and to reach more people with the truth. Let us, as Jesus said, be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves.

Finally, I want to impress upon you two amazing facts about your Bible and change:

- God has so constructed the Bible that, whenever a new technology comes along that is beneficial and not opposed to any Scriptural principle, the church can take full advantage of it. (Jesus just said "go" and preach the gospel. That frees us to use any mode of transportation and/or communication. If He had said "WALK and preach the gospel," we would all be in a lot of trouble.)
- And consider that, after all the changes, inventions, and discoveries made over the many centuries the Bible has been in existence, not one of those

discoveries has made any part of the Bible obsolete. Textbooks and encyclopedias can become obsolete after only ten years. The Bible, after almost 2,000 years, is still valid. No other book can match that standard.

Change is sometimes good; so is stability, May God give us wisdom to know when to stay the course and when to embrace “some new thing.” --John Temples