

The Unchanging Church with Changing Features

You may react to the title above with shock and revulsion, especially if you are one who decries so-called “change agents” among us. The title is so contradictory that you do not have to think twice before forming your negative reaction. So my present challenge is to be clear enough to change your mind on this subject.

As an entity, the church is unchangeable. As has been emphasized in previous lessons, the church is the people whom God has saved – the forgiven ones. It is composed of those who heard, believed, and obeyed the Gospel, being baptized according to the Great Commission of Christ (Matt. 28:18-20). They are the “ekklesia,” those called out into a community in Christ. By one Spirit they were all baptized into one body of divinely created unity.

That cannot change. The Gospel message was proclaimed on Pentecost long before any epistle was written, and it cannot be altered, though many claim to preach it without mentioning the inclusion of the Great Commission. The Gospel message ties us with the past. In all ages since Pentecost the essential nature of the church has not changed. Those who would seek for the church today must find it through the same Gospel they preached then.

I am the same person that I was when I was born eighty-six years ago. Neither I nor anyone else can change that unalterable fact. While maintaining my original and essential identity, however, I have changed so much in the intervening years that only a DNA test could prove that I am the same person. No one would have wanted me to remain an infant. My parents did not reject me because I was growing and maturing physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially though they were concerned about my proper development in all those areas. They welcomed my changing features.

The church comprising the forgiven ones is a living entity. Living things change. The inspired teachings given after Pentecost offer instructions, exhortations, and warnings as to how believers were to implement the universal laws of God – to love him and to love their fellow man in their society. Societies vary in different cultures, countries, and ages. What demonstrated respect and love in one time and place might be meaningless in another time, place, and culture.

Some Arabs still require women to wear the full head covering, or veil. It ties them to the past by an unchanging dogma. Was that what Paul was legislating universally? Whether a woman wears something on her head or wears her hair at a certain length no longer means anything in our age and culture. Trying to make veils and hair length into an unchanging, universally binding dogma would be a great detriment to the cause of Christ in most of the world. Those are customs having no spiritual value today.

In Corinth there was a principle involved, however. Paul was a champion of liberty in Christ, but the freedom that some female disciples were exercising in dress and decorum imitated the cult prostitutes of that city. That would bring shame on both Christ and their husbands. That particular situation does not exist in our culture, but the principle still

applies that women should not imitate the styles and demeanor of those who flaunt sexuality and promiscuity.

Paul expressed to Timothy, *“I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God”* (1 Tim. 2:9-10 NIV; see 1 Pet. 3:1-6). Paul and Peter referred particularly to prideful vanity of dress. Neither here nor elsewhere are recommended styles or the amount of covering prescribed. Styles considered appropriate change with culture. Aboriginal tribes making no use of clothing are not shocked by the lack of it. But in Paul’s day, a woman seen in public bare-headed in a sleeveless, knee-length dress would have been shocking even as also a man wearing two-legged trousers might have seemed inappropriate!

Inspired writers did not try to make certain styles or customs universal. They did not try to portray disciples as freaks but called for moderation with proper emphasis and respect. No one should flaunt sexuality or wealth. That would be indecent and immodest. Some writer whose name I cannot recall expressed wisely, “Be not the first by which the new is tried nor yet the last to lay the old aside.”

The changing face on the community of believers may be seen in the disuse of the veil, the extending of greetings by a hand-shake or hug instead of a kiss, the lack of ritualistic foot-washing, and the indifference to fasting. These are cultural matters that lack in any sacramental or spiritual value.

As we expressed last week, the church today has no apostles and other original features.

Jesus chose no female apostles. The early church was male-dominated. Was this the influence of universal law or principle? Or was it an avoidance of an unnecessary breach of custom in various areas in the world of the early preaching?

Joel’s prophecy was quoted as being fulfilled by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, indicating that women would receive the Spirit and prophesy (teach) along with the men (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:17-21). Paul indicated that women could pray and prophesy in the assemblies (1 Cor. 11) and did not change his mind three chapters later! Other references indicate that, even though they were restrained by custom at the time, the door was being opened so that when custom changed, they could fully exercise their freedom. Shall we continue to “quench the Spirit” by making law out of customs of centuries past?

Some speak disrespectfully of our founding fathers and sneer at the Constitution they adopted which recognizes the equality of all men while slavery was practiced in many states. I make no defense of slavery, but these critics either ignore, or are ignorant of, a vital principle. If you had been one of those founding fathers, which would you have voted for – a condemnation of slavery which the Southern States would never have agreed to, or a constitution which all would sign that set forth the principle of equality and freedom which would ultimately bring about the liberation of the slaves? If the slave states had refused to form a union with the free states, then any hope of freedom in those states would have been killed. So it was a wise choice of courageous men to choose the better of two unsatisfactory choices.

Jesus and the apostles were faced with a similar dilemma. If they had demanded immediate freedom of all slaves, Christianity would have become a political movement that would have been crushed by civil governments. It was an evolutionary movement instead of a revolutionary movement. They set forth principles which immediately began to affect those like Philemon who were devoted to Christ. However, it required centuries for civil governments to relieve slavery, and total relief is not seen yet. Through principle rather than condemnation, the influence of Christianity has born fruit in nations even where Christ is not honored otherwise. The changing face of the church has helped to change the face of society.

Modeling after modern evangelical churches, we have tended to make dogmatic assumptions about how many assemblies are needed, when they should be, and what is appropriate to do in them. None of those details are specified in the Scriptures. I can remember when a Sunday morning assembly was thought to be sufficient. We added classes. Then Sunday evening meetings were added along with a young people's meeting. That still was not enough, so we started having midweek services. After the fact, preachers began to emphasize those meetings, and many doubts were raised by them about whether one could ignore any of them and be saved. One passage (Hebrews 10:25) was the text abused to legally bind all of them! They were added to the unchanging church and then became a changed feature of the church that proponents try to bind on us as unchanging.

Among the redeemed ones depicted in Acts and the epistles, public assemblies were of much more importance than they are today. That is not because of a change of dogma but in recognition of the purposes they were and are to fulfill. They did not have Bibles, books, commentaries, journals, radio, television, record players, videos, or telephones for individual study and communication, but they had to depend upon a qualified person to teach them. They met together for that and for mutual edification. Due to modern communications, we do not have to depend upon assemblies as much for that sort of upbuilding. This is not to deny the need and value of assemblies today but it calls for a reassessment of what we do in them rather than trying to duplicate exactly what they did in Paul's day. I have dealt with these matters in much greater detail in FR 181 through 188 which are posted at my web site www.freedomstring.org.

We still generally hold on to the pulpit monologue as essential, but it is probably the poorest of educational methods. Change in music meets opposition. It met opposition in the Protestant Reformation when popular music was introduced. In modern times, Charles Wesley probably would have been dismayed by the fast tempo with which we sang his songs. David might be horrified at the fast clip we put to his psalms, declaring that rhythm has replaced meditation and repetition is substituted for meaning. The style of music is another acceptably changing feature of the church.

In essence, the church of the twenty-first century is identical to that of the first century but its outward features must of necessity be decidedly different. Let's get used to it! []

(Cecil Hook: July 2005)

Talkin' Texas: 21 cities/towns in Texas bear the name of one of our presidents.

"I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

