

Just Call Me a “Change Agent”

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Introduction

All right, I admit it: I am a “change agent”! Unquestionably, there are some things about and in the Lord’s church that need to be changed, and I want to do my best to change them. The Lord’s people should not be afraid of change—of the right kind. In fact, every faithful saint should want to be an agent to facilitate certain changes in the church. Let me put your mind at ease right now. The changes in the church I believe we need to make are not even fourth cousins to those that certain renegade erstwhile brethren are so zealously urging.

The liberal change agents claim that they only want to change some cultural, traditional “hangovers” from past generations. Then they start playing with the worship (not just the order of the authorized acts, but with the practices—the acts themselves), placing women in worship leadership roles, altering the plan of salvation, and tinkering with church organization. Some of these fellows have made it clear that they either do not know the difference between things optional and things obligatory, or they think that those of us who resist them are too demented to make the distinction. The motivation of some is to “do whatever it takes” to bring numerical growth that rivals that of the fast-growing denominations. Others push for change to escape the charge of narrow-mindedness by denominational preachers and/or academic associates. The model of such agents of change is the fashionable “community” church concept. Their means is to denominationalize the church of the living God—without batting an eye.

Just such change agents a century ago took a large percentage of the bride of Christ into the figurative whoredom of denominationalism (and to think that some of the current change advocates fancy themselves “restoration historians”!). I do not know about you, dear reader, but I do not want the church of Christ to go there again, and I will do all that I can to be an “anti-change agent” for all such changes.

Having said all this, I still believe I must do what I can to bring about certain changes in my brethren and myself. In fact, I have been such a change advocate ever since my first miserable attempt to preach a sermon on that Lord’s Day evening in Boise, Idaho, in 1954! The changes I seek are not in such things as the plan of salvation, the organization, work, worship, and designation of the church, or in our hermeneutical principles—the very things the liberals are so ferociously assaulting. These are clearly set forth in the New Testament, and they have

been restored wherever men and women have been content to faithfully adhere to the Bible alone. The New Testament pattern setting forth these matters has been successfully defended on the polemic platform hundreds of times over almost two centuries. No Johnny-come-lately academic, big city pulpiteer, or best-selling author can take the pattern from us, though they would give ever-so-much to do so.

No, the changes I see we need to make have to do with the practical application of the will of the Lord, rather than with changes in the pattern for the church that we have somehow missed along the way. Let me now suggest some of the areas in which I believe we all should be “change agents.”

Selfishness

If there is a single “besetting sin” that is more common (and more the cause of other sins) than selfishness, I do not know what it might be. I have for several years challenged brethren to whom I have preached to name a single sin (except one sin done in ignorance) that does not have selfishness at its root. I have never found anyone who could name one. In fact, a sin done in ignorance might possibly be due to selfishness — selfish pursuits that were placed before Bible study. Murder, theft, fornication, physical assault, rape — name what crime or sin you will; selfishness is at its root.

Most brethren will never become involved in criminal activities. However, brethren do become involved in various wrong and extremely harmful things caused by selfishness. These acts cause much damage to the Lord’s church and will cause their perpetrators to be eternally lost if they fail to repent of them. While many congregations are necessarily dividing over obligatory doctrinal concerns in these stressful times (thanks to the liberal change agents), many other divisions have no doctrinal basis whatsoever. Preachers, elders, deacons, teachers, song leaders (and wives of all of these), rich folk, poor folk, and all other sorts have been guilty of dividing congregations from time to time simply because they had to have things done their way or “else.” This *else* almost always spells disaster! When someone or ones divide a congregation over the color of paint on the wall or carpet on the floors, or whether or not brethren can purchase religious books on church property, selfishness (not to mention Satan) has triumphed again.

When one considers the fundamental relationship of selfishness to all forms of sin, he will not wonder at the frequency of the subject in the New Testament. When Jesus said that His

followers must “deny self,” selfishness was His target (Luke 9:23). As God’s people, we should put aside selfish pursuits and seek to edify those who are weak (Rom. 15:1-2). Christians should “no longer live unto themselves,” but unto Christ (2 Cor. 5:15). Selfishness caused brethren to desert Paul in an hour of great need: “For they all seek their own, not the things of Jesus Christ” (Phi. 2:21; cf. 2 Tim. 4:10). Paul prophesied that grievous times in the “last days” would be characterized in part by men who would be “lovers of self” (2 Tim. 3:2). Dozens of other passages follow the same theme, making freedom from selfishness one of the most pivotal of all New Testament themes. I urge us all to become agents of change concerning the character flaw of selfishness, each beginning with him–or herself. Just imagine what a revolution this would work in every congregation!

Materialism

So many of the Lord’s people are so wedded to this world and its trapping and trinkets that they could more accurately be called “the world’s people.” One can see people by the thousands in the church who have their affections firmly set on “the things that are upon the earth,” rather than seeking “the things that are above” (Col. 3:1-2). This shows in the contribution plate on the Lord’s Day. One’s values would seem to be seriously “out of whack” when his financial contribution relating to a home in Heaven equals only a small fraction of what he or she spends on an earthly dwelling. Some brethren spend more for one day of the year (“Christmas”) than they give to the Lord all year. Others spend more on their two-week vacation than they do the rest of the year on the only work that will survive The Last Day. With some, it is not just a matter of money, but of time and attention that are so riveted on earthly “success,” amassing wealth, and providing every conceivable creature comfort for their families, that they have no time even to assemble regularly with the saints, much less to advance the cause for which Christ died.

It is not sinful to be wealthy. There will doubtless be many wealthy folk in Heaven, although the Lord said that reaching it is more difficult for them (Mat. 19:24). We even know the names of some of them who succeeded (Mat. 8:11). It is sinful to love wealth so much that its pursuit drives and consumes us (which fact is closely related to the Bible’s consistent condemnation of selfishness). The love of money will always be a root of all kinds of evil, leading men astray and bringing them to regret in both time and eternity (1 Tim 6:10-11).

We should not be surprised that the Lord urged his followers to be more concerned about laying up treasures in Heaven than upon the Earth (Mat. 6:19-34). It was at the conclusion

of this context that He spoke the famous and familiar challenge: “But seek ye [in contrast to what people in the world seek] first his [God’s] kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Mat. 6:33). Every one of the numerous Scriptural warnings against covetousness are a condemnation of materialism. Paul’s instructions to the Corinthians constitute a manual on how to view and use our money so as to overcome materialism. We are to give regularly, proportionately, liberally, willingly, bountifully, purposefully, ungrudgingly, cheerfully, and hopefully (1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 8:1–15; 9:1–15).

Should we not all be change agents concerning the grievous and widespread curse of materialism among the saints?

Church Discipline

The flaws of selfishness and materialism relate principally to individual behavior (although, arguably, some entire congregations have fallen prey to these also). “Church discipline” also relates to individual behavior (i.e., a congregation cannot do what its members will not do). However, I want to consider this subject from the standpoint of congregational action, and especially, the terminal step of discipline—withdrawal of fellowship.

Congregations so seldom discipline their own members that the mandate to do so has been called “the forgotten commandment.” One would think from the sparseness of the practice that brethren either do not understand the Bible’s instruction or that no impenitent public sinners can be found in any congregation of God’s elect. Alas, neither represents reality. New Testament teaching on this subject is plain and profuse (e.g., Mat. 18:15–17; Acts 8:20–23; Rom. 16:17–18; 1 Cor. 5:1–13; Gal. 6:1; 2 The. 3:6, 14–15; 1 Tim. 1:19–20; Tit. 1:10–14; 3:10). Moreover, there is likely open sin in most sizeable congregations.

What happens when a congregation fails to discipline itself?

- Those in sin infer that sin is not so awful and that they need not be ashamed of it
- Those in sin are encouraged to continue in their sin, rather than to repent
- The only thing that will alert some brethren to the danger of their spiritual condition is not utilized
- The congregation is affected and corrupted to the degree that open sin is condoned
- Worldlings see a soiled and stained, instead of a pure, bride of Christ
- Plain commands of Scripture are ignored and disobeyed

All who love the Lord and respect His Word should become “change agents” concerning the neglect of congregational discipline, if it is not a part of the work of their

congregations. It must be done out of love—for the sinner, for the church, for God’s Word, and for the Lord Who purchased the church with the price of His blood (Acts 20:28). It is not the most enjoyable part of serving the Lord, but it is a necessary part. Brethren have offered many excuses for not obeying the Lord in this matter, but it really boils down to the degree of respect we have for His Word.

Yes, I boldly and strongly advocate change from the neglect of implementing God’s will in all three of these areas!

[Note: I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the May 2001 issue of *The Gospel Journal*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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