

Avoiding New Fads

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Introduction

The worldly, fashion-mad nature of humankind has changed little through the centuries. Luke provides an interesting description of the philosophers whom Paul encountered at Mars Hill in ancient Athens: “Now all the Athenians and the strangers sojourning there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear something new” (Acts 17:21).¹ The word *new* in this passage comes from the root word *kainos*, which means “that which is unaccustomed or unused, not new in time, but new as to form or quality, of different nature from what is contrasted as old.”² This definition tells us that those Athenians were always looking for something different, new-fangled, novel, modern – some new gadget or fresh gimmick. In short, they were **fad-mad!**

Men and women of the present generation collectively spend millions of dollars each year on such things as the latest fashions in clothing, the newest electronic gadgets and devices, and the most recent model of cars or trucks. The almost axiomatic philosophy seems to be “new is better.” Some allowance may be made for this spirit as relatively harmless (albeit often wasteful) in matters secular.

However, this philosophy is one of Satan’s most destructive tools and insidious weapons in the realm of religion. The words *innovation*, *fad*, and *new* (in essence rather than in time) are virtually interchangeable when they pertain to the doctrine and practice of God-ordained religion. Perhaps it was too early to be a fad, but Cain’s rejected grain offering was definitely innovative and new in form and nature compared to what God authorized (Gen. 4:2–5; Heb. 11:4; Rom. 10:17). Israel first apostatized as a nation after the deaths of Joshua and the elders by adopting the fad of pagan Canaanite religion (Jud. 2:7–13). Later, in the time of Samuel, God’s people demanded a king to rule over them “that we also may be like all the nations” (1 Sam. 8:20) – a blatant innovation and new practice in Israel. They were willing to reject God (v. 7) in order to keep up with what their pagan neighbors were doing.

The monster of Roman Catholicism did not instantly appear, but was the result of centuries of gradual, creeping introductions of new and faddish innovations. Neither did the two branches of the Christian Church sect (Disciples of Christ and Independent Christian Church) appear overnight. What began in the mid-nineteenth century with the desire of some

brethren to employ “only” two fads in religion (mechanical musical instruments in the worship and a missionary society in the work of the church) had developed into a full-scale apostasy and division by the turn of the century. It was easily predictable that both of those religious bodies would only move farther from teaching and practicing pure religion as they have continued incessantly to adopt innovation upon innovation. So goes the sad story of man’s unwillingness to be content with religion as God has ordained, authorized, and revealed it.

Some of the Fads of Our Time

In spite of the clear lessons of history, men seem always too dull to learn from them. It is obvious that many among us (1) are ignorant of history, including Bible and church history (a certainty!) or (2) they know history, but are either determined to revise it to suit their own change-agenda purposes or do not believe history holds any lessons for us. As we observe the behavior of many brethren over the last third of the twentieth century, we are tempted to wonder if they somehow found a time machine that allowed them to travel back to old Athens so as to be inspired by those fad-mad philosophers. The fads with which the fad-mongers have burdened the church are many and diverse. Every authorized activity of the church has been affected and altered by them. Beyond this fact, the fad-fever has resulted in the involvement of numerous congregations in activities that are altogether unrelated to any work the Lord authorized His church to do. While I will attempt to categorize some of them, there will be some obvious overlapping.

Evangelism Fads

The rule in “evangelism” among many is apparently pragmatism—if it works to draw a crowd and fill a building, use it. A fundamental error of this “Trojan horse” excuse for fad and innovation is that it fails to distinguish assembling a big crowd from evangelism. Although many thus behave, not all are so bold as one liberal was to declare in a bulletin article a few years ago: “Good people...if it attracts lost men and it is not inherently wrong—use it!”³ This was his justifying maxim in the same article for a church offering children candy to get them to ride the church bus, using basketball to attract teenagers, holding a cookout to lure adults, and such like. The “bus ministry” fad mentioned above, which was the rage for a few years, is now passé.⁴ Some of the “big thinkers” decided bicycles, \$10.00 bills, and helicopter rides would work even better than candy to draw crowds. It took some longer than others, but just about all (even the innovators) learned that children lured by prizes would just as quickly be lured by the Baptist or Pentecostal Church down the street when offered a better prize. Few can be found

who were taught and genuinely converted through so-called “bus evangelism,” in spite of the expenditure of uncounted dollars and hours of labor invested in it.

More recent crowd-drawing fads have involved outright entertainment programs. A few years ago, a brother by the name of Ben Zickefoose (a long-time member of the ACU athletic faculty) put a one-man acrobatic show together which he billed “Gymnastics to the Glory of God.” Many congregations eagerly scheduled his performances, especially to draw crowds for youth rallies. About the same time, another fellow put together a one-man magic performance he called “Magic for the Master.” In 1983, after I delivered a sermon in California in which I denounced such gimmickry, the “Magic for the Master” brother introduced himself to me and proudly handed me his calling card. Later I discovered that he was multi-talented — when I turned the card over, I discovered that he also did “Juggling for Jesus”!

The “religious” drama fad, in which one or more actors supposedly dramatize some Bible story or the life of some Bible character, is one of the current rages among liberals.⁵ The principal “outreach” activity of a California congregation (yes, a “Church of Christ”) in 1995 was the staging, production, and repeated performance of the Broadway play, “Joseph’s Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat” in the church auditorium. Among other things it featured a naked-to-the-waist “Joseph” whose chest was seductively rubbed by a “Mrs. Potiphar” who, as with the original seductress, was not his wife. One brother makes the rounds of liberal congregations with a one-man dramatization of the life of Paul. Other congregations now have their own “clown ministry” and/or “puppet ministry,” which, we assume, are supposed to make a favorable impression on sinners so they will be led to Christ. The congregations that promote recreational programs and/or gymnasiums built for that purpose most often seek to justify them as “evangelistic” tools.

Not only are churches engaging in faddish, unauthorized activities in the name of “evangelism,” but many (often the same ones) are travelling the *end-justifies-the-means* route of funding their pseudo-evangelistic works. Yard and garage sales, bake sales, car washes, “slave” sales, and the like have become commonplace announcements on church marquees and in church bulletins. Such activities indicate either consummate ignorance of or utter contempt for New Testament doctrine and authorized practice. One classic (and ironic) case is illustrated by the church bulletin, which, on the same page, carries an announcement of a garage sale by the “Missions Ministry” for the sake of “Mission efforts not in our budget,” and a note urging new Christians and others who “feel they need to learn some basic teachings” to attend a class

taught by two elders!⁶ Apparently the whole congregation, including its elders, needs to attend such a class, but one taught by someone who knows and respects the Word of God. Such an announcement is not surprising when one reads that one of the beneficiaries of the garage sale was to be the well-documented St. Louis, Missouri, heretic, Stanley Shipp.

While we may applaud the motivation of all such fads, we decry the implicit trivializing and profaning of the Truth and of the God Who gave it by such inane, humanly conceived efforts.

Edification Fads

The use of denominational video and print resources for “Bible” classes has become commonplace in some congregations. Zig Ziglar (Baptist) films, James Dobson (Nazarene) books and videos, and Joyce Landorf (denomination unknown) books, and other such materials have been announced in various church bulletins as materials used in “Bible classes.” Then there are the graded “Bible” school materials sold by Gospel Advocate and Sweet Publishing Company which they have bought from denominational publishers and put their own covers on. Little better is the use of materials written by liberal brethren. Sometimes even conservative brethren will excuse their printing of articles and/or commendations of books by such men as Rubel Shelly, Max Lucado, or F. LaGard Smith on the ground that they “do not teach error” in those specific documents. Somehow, they seem unable to see that to use an article or to commend a book that may be innocent of error (although such is more and more difficult to find from such men), even with some sort of disclaimer, simply sets the uninformed or neophyte saint up to accept the soul-poison for which these men are so famous. Often one (man or woman) is brought to a congregation for a “seminar,” a “ladies’ day,” or a lecture series merely because he/she is a popular, “dynamic” speaker, with little or no thought concerning his/her loyalty to Gospel Truth. However, some churches seek out those who are well-known for their radical and compromising doctrinal pronouncements because such churches have jumped on the liberal fad-wagon, and they thrive on it.

Worship Fads

Man has proved himself a remarkable innovator in his worship practices, the beginning of which goes all the way back to “the way of Cain” (Gen. 4; Jude 11). Public worship of the saints is one of the areas on which the Change Agents have particularly concentrated in their nefarious efforts. Scripturally authorized congregational singing of psalms, hymns, and

spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) have proved too dull, drab, and traditional for these folk. Thus, they push the employment of “special music,” including such things as the following:

1. Performances by one or more special singers (solos, quartets, choirs) that sing **to** those assembled
2. The use of special “assigned” singers (including men and women) whose voices are electronically amplified and who may sit in the assembly (either together or at various places) or may be standing up front as song leaders
3. The employment of professional performance groups (e.g., Acappella Vocal Band, et al.) who contract concerts in which they sometimes inspire handclapping and dancing in the aisles to the accompaniment of their work and who mimic the sounds of instruments
4. The discarding of well-known, uplifting, Scriptural songs of faith in favor of “contemporary” religious songs
5. Some congregations are now inviting/sponsoring singers that have their own instrumental bands. The Otter Creek Church of Christ in Nashville, Tennessee, hosted the performance of a group calling themselves “Full Access” for their Wednesday night meeting June 4, 1997. They were backed up and accompanied by a full band and played to a packed house.⁷

In the 1970s someone started the *singing-during-the-Lord's* supper fad (I always wondered why no one ever wanted to sing during the prayers or the sermon). For several years now, the juvenile denominational gimmick of “responsive readings” of Scripture has been employed in some congregations (a man [in some places a woman] reads one verse aloud and the assembly reads the next verse and they go back and forth). Other worship fads include using women in leadership roles such as helping to serve the Lord's Supper to the congregation and allowing them to read the Scripture from the front pew in the worship assembly. Then, there is the applause craze—after a baptism, following a birth announcement, or when the preacher says something the audience likes. Some of our brethren have eagerly adopted the Pentecostal practices of shouting “hallelujah” and/or its translation, “praise the Lord,” and of lifting and fluttering the hands as they sway back and forth during prayers or songs in sort of a religious “wave.” Drama performances are not only used to draw crowds (as previously indicated), but they are also strongly urged as “worship” activities by the Change Agents.

Entertainment/Recreational Fads

In the late 1950s and early 1960s most faithful brethren were highly suspicious of “youth directors” as used by the denominations. They could see that these fellows were to a great degree highly paid babysitters and recreational directors. Despite this, a few of our larger congregations dared to begin employing them, and they caught on in a big way by about 1970.

In the observation of this writer, what they were in the denominations they have generally become among us. Usually those who fill this role and to whom we entrust the spiritual guidance of our children are often young men who are themselves immature and in need of guidance. Beyond this, in some cases these young men have not been closely supervised by elders or parents concerning their doctrinal stability and moral example. This negligence has resulted in divided churches and creation of disrespect in children for their parents and for the Truth. The annual “Youth Ministers’ Workshop” sponsored by Lubbock Christian University has proved to be a breeding-ground and rallying-point for liberalism among youth directors. A few years ago, Randy Mayeaux, who has since openly abandoned the Lord’s church (though in his heart, he had done so long before), was the featured speaker to this group. Among other things, he advocated using women as preachers and “grace only” doctrine. It is evident that some of the youth directors have an agenda—a “mission”—to turn the young people to liberalism and thereby steal the church.

While youth directors are allegedly hired to “work with the young people” in planning spiritual activities that will help them mature in both knowledge and behavior, the pressures are fierce to attract and maintain the interest of all of the youngsters and their friends. Accordingly, the planned activities often eventuate in being long on fun and short on teaching or other spiritual elements. The parties, ski trips, campouts, lock-ins, and such like, may include a “devotional” here or there, but the attraction and atmosphere are decidedly recreation-oriented. The same things apply to the recreational activities so many congregations now sponsor for senior citizens, using the church bus or van and spending the Lord’s money on their recreational excursions. (If they want to take trips together, fine—but we have never understood why the church should pay for it.) Some congregations employ a man just for the purpose of keeping the older generation happy. Wholesome fun and recreation are wonderful things for folk whether young or old, but we question the wisdom, yea, the Scriptural authority, of the church’s paying someone to spend much of his time planning and coordinating such.

This questioning is not to say that every youth director has the sinister motive of leading the young people astray or that none of them provide real spiritual leadership. It is to suggest that it is a fad that has not been well thought out by very many elders or preachers. I have believed for years that the Lord provided youngsters with the best youth directors they could have when he gave them parents (Eph. 6:1–4), rather than someone hired by the church. It is axiomatic that children need well-supervised and clean recreational and social opportunities,

but are parents so bereft of intelligence, time, and resources that they cannot provide them? Let a congregation have as many evangelists as it can afford (as did Antioch, Acts. 13:1), but their work should be just that—evangelizing, rather than being a social/entertainment/ recreation director, whether for young or old.

Then there are the recreational buildings or gymnasiums, trying their best to hide (but not quite succeeding) under the innocuous term, “family life centers.” After all, what Christian (except some old negative, stick-in-the-mud mossback) could possibly be opposed to something that will benefit families, especially children? These facilities are not only justified on the basis of their contribution to family life, keeping kids off the streets, and so forth, but (as earlier mentioned) as “evangelistic” tools. After all, if brother Joe Blow can get his friend at work to come play volleyball with him and some other brethren, he’s bound to be able to convert him. One congregation in Texas was contemplating putting an “evangelistic” restaurant in its gym as it was being planned, and why not if the gym itself can be thus justified? When this same church announced the grand opening of its family life center, the policy statement governing its use occupied a full two-page insert in the church bulletin. Although we are to understand that the building under consideration is definitely not a gymnasium, the policy statement for its use mentioned “balls” (twice), “footballs,” “baseballs,” “basketball,” and “basketball goals” and how their use is to be regulated!⁸

Organizational Fads

One of the latest fads relating to church organization, especially among liberal churches, is the selection and appointment (or “de-appointment”) of existing elders by a reevaluation/reaffirmation process.⁹ Generally, the process involves the appointment of a selection committee (containing no elders or prospective elders), which stands between existing elders and the congregation, sets up the voting percentage formula for reappointment or appointment, and is generally vested with authority over the entire process. (Why do they need an eldership when they have an “administrative committee” that outranks the elders?) Some of the congregations have a stated tenure limitation for both elders and deacons, after which time they can choose to resign or submit themselves for reevaluation and possible reappointment. This writer sees many unauthorized and dangerous elements in this procedure, but the appointment of a committee that has authority over existing elders is quite sufficient reason to oppose any such arrangement as unauthorized (Acts 20:28).

Another fad relating to elders has to do with seeking and employing a preacher. If ever there were a responsibility that belongs ultimately to an eldership (those who are charged with feeding the flock) it is this one. However, more and more we hear of elderships choosing a “search committee” or “pulpit committee” for this task. Often these committees are specifically chosen so as to get a “cross section” of the membership, which might include widely divergent views of what a Gospel preacher and sound doctrine really are. Such a committee could very well exclude from consideration the very man who would/should be hired, and it might recommend one who would/should not have been hired, had the elders not shirked their responsibility in this regard.

Perhaps the most extreme example of organizational faddism is the self-appointment to “apostleship” by Don Finto of Nashville, Tennessee. Few will be surprised that Max Lucado and Rubel Shelly have now publicly endorsed the Nashville “apostle” as one whom they admire and whose fellowship they treasure.¹⁰

Doctrinal Fads

Loss of loyalty to and stability in doctrinal Truth is the root of all of the aforementioned fads. People do not begin meandering in their practice till they have first begun to do so in their doctrine. Some attention therefore needs to be given to some doctrinal fads. One that has apparently had longer-lasting effects than first expected – *The Man or the plan* controversy that arose in the early 1960s. Some preachers began accusing earlier Gospel preachers of preaching too much of “the plan” (i.e., doctrine) and not enough of “the Man” (i.e., Christ). Ironically, those being so accused were generally stalwarts of the few preceding decades, under whose preaching the Lord’s church became the most rapidly-growing religious body in the nation. During the discussion of this charge through numerous sermons and articles, it was pointed out that one cannot separate Christ from His doctrine and vice versa. If one faithfully preaches Christ, he must preach His doctrine. Conversely, New Testament doctrine is a non-entity apart from its Author, the Christ. A significant illustration of this cohesion is that the Ethiopian on the road to Gaza asked to be baptized upon the preaching of “Jesus” by Philip (Acts 8:35–36). However, this liberal concept of toning down the message did its damage. The seed-thought was planted that later produced a new breed of preachers that would increasingly exchange preaching plainly on doctrinal themes and the distinctiveness of the church for a non-offensive “Dale Carnegie” approach.

The phenomenon just described provided the matrix for administrators of colleges and universities operated by brethren to hire doctrinally soft men charged with educating young men who wanted to preach. This process has now advanced considerably: The administrators in many such schools now hire men in their religion departments who have a track record of heresy, and they defend and protect said professors when their heresies are exposed. (However, this fact does not explain all of the doctrinal misfits who are the vanguard of liberalism among us. Men such as Lynn Anderson, John Allen Chalk, Rubel Shelly, and Calvin Warpula have no such “excuse.” They, as did I, came up under the tutelage and influence of H.A. Dixon, Frank VanDyke, G.K. Wallace, Paul Southern, Guy N. Woods, Gus Nichols, and like champions of Truth – and apostatized in spite of it.)

Neo-Pentecostalism swept through the denominational ranks in the late 1960s. The mitigation of plain doctrinal preaching in the early 1960s set the stage for many brethren (including women) to succumb to it. However, many of the antics and fads with which our brethren are so enamored currently (i.e., hand clapping, “special music” [sometimes including instrumental backup] led by “praise teams,” raising and fluttering the hands, and doctrinal utterances advocating and/or claiming direct guidance and instruction from the Holy Spirit) smack more of **old** than of **neo**-Pentecostalism!

Doctrinal fads have proliferated in the past and present decade, although they do not really represent any new doctrines per se. They are “new” only in the sense that they had not been heard among us before, except from some correctly branded doctrinal mavericks. The frightening thing to contemplate is that, as abnormal and aberrant morals are gradually being accepted as “normal” in our nation, just so, abnormal and false doctrines are increasingly being accepted as “normal” and “true” by groups that meet in buildings labeled “Church of Christ.” Just as the “new hermeneutics” championed by the liberals the last few years are actually the “old [flawed] hermeneutics” that have produced and maintained denominationalism for centuries, so the “new” doctrines being spouted by the liberals are not new at all. For the most part they are merely warmed-over denominational tenets that loyal soldiers of the cross have uprooted hundreds of times on the polemic platform over the past 175 years.

The doctrinal fads are many and diverse, such as the following:

1. Salvation by praying the “sinner’s prayer.”
2. Salvation by grace alone.
3. Salvation without the sinner’s contributing “one whit” to his own salvation.

4. There is “room in the kingdom” for those who teach that baptism is “because of” remission of sins.”
5. One need not know the Scriptural purpose of baptism for it to be Scriptural baptism.
6. As long as one is baptized “to obey God” his baptism is Scriptural.
7. Premillennialism should not be a fellowship issue.
8. Instrumental music in worship is not a “Heaven or Hell” issue.
9. The church is composed of all the denominations.
10. The church of Christ is only a denomination.
11. The Holy Spirit operates directly upon the hearts of Christians, as well as through His written Word, to strengthen them and bear spiritual fruit in them.
12. Anyone who calls God “Father” is to be accepted as a brother.
13. The grounds of fellowship are only the “core/bull’s eye” items of the Gospel (i.e., death, burial, resurrection of Christ, and another fundamental fact or two—whatever the Change Agents say they are).
14. Fellowship is not based on doctrine (i.e., worship practices, church organization, et al.).
15. Denial of verbal inspiration.

To this list could be added at least a dozen false ideas concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage, all designed in one way or another to excuse adulterous sexual unions. Then there is the absurd A.D. 70/preterist theology, which insists that Christ came, raised all the dead, conducted the final Judgment, and ushered in eternity in A.D. 70! This list is by no means exhaustive, but it is sufficient to diagnose the doctrinal cancer that is consuming the body of Christ.

Justifications Offered for Fads

Obviously, not all the foregoing fads are equally threatening to the faith, but they all have in common the mania for change and the lust for something “new” that hold so many in their grip. The fad-pushers proffer various justifications, some of which somewhat overlap:

They work

This is all that matters to some. When one confuses drawing a crowd, filling a building, and “forced” numerical congregational growth with serving God, pleasing God, and evangelism, pragmatism is the sine qua non. Many now subscribe to the dictum of the brother quoted previously: “If it attracts lost men...use it.” Another version of this theme is *They must be doing something right* that was inanely babbled by certain spiritual pygmies when the Crossroads movement was growing rapidly in numbers. The pragmatist, by definition, cares not about

Scriptural authority for his practices. How ironic! He uses unspiritual, worldly, sometimes side-show bait to lure large numbers of people to a church building (and maybe even into the baptistery) and then uses the large numbers thus attracted as evidence that God has blessed such efforts with success. But wait a minute! Billy Graham attracts larger crowds than any of our most liberal preachers (except for the apostate Max Lucado) and the pope outdraws Graham. Sad to say, some among us are so utterly void of the Truth that they might even laud these men as God's servants.

God used gimmicks

The same brother who blessed us with the statement of pragmatism quoted just above also wrote the following justification for his faddism:

If it didn't bother God to use special 'gimmicks' to attract people, why should it bother us? Read Acts 2:1-6. Note especially verses 2 and 6. God got the people's attention through a gimmick! He used the sound of a roaring wind. If God can use a gimmick like that, why can't we?¹¹

To identify any of the events precipitated by God on Pentecost as "gimmicks" at least borders on blasphemy. The lengths to which men will go to justify their religious antics seem to be unending.

The prodigal son

Incredibly, one brother is so desperate to turn worship topsy-turvy that he has perverted the touching story (Luke 15) of the love for and forgiveness of God toward His penitent children to suit his wicked aim. In the 1989 Nashville "Jubilee" Marvin Phillips of Tulsa, Oklahoma, referred to the welcome-home celebration for the prodigal son as "a church service going on" and "what a church service should be."¹² He opined, "Church is always supposed to be a party" and justified special and instrumental music and dancing in worship on the basis that the elder brother heard such being done in honor of his penitent brother. This use of the parable is so contorted that it hardly deserves a response, but it does serve as an extreme illustration of how **NOT** to interpret and apply a parable. One of the most elementary rules of hermeneutics relating to parables warns the student not to confuse the "drapery" of a parable with the principles it teaches. The party is obviously merely a part of the "drapery" of the parable to make it true to life. It no more represents Christian worship than does the inn in the parable of the "certain Samaritan" (Luke 10:34) represents the church. To be consistent, this misguided expositor must also argue that we should have animal sacrifices in our worship

assemblies (did they not kill a fatted calf to begin the party?). I would not be too surprised if some of the Change Agents come to just such a thing.

They help maintain strong families

I earlier alluded to this excuse in connection with the *gymnasium* and *youth director* fads. This claim is about on the same level as the political/social liberal's premise for pouring millions of our tax dollars into "midnight basketball" in recent years. Creating and maintaining strong families requires vastly more than "keeping kids off the streets" or providing sports and recreational facilities. Even if these items were a panacea for the grievous problems that curse the families and homes of our nation, the church still should not be burdened with them. But alas, the plague of home and family rot that pervades our time requires a more basic and powerful cure than any such mercurochrome and Band-Aid approach. Home and family problems stem from a deep-rooted spiritual malnutrition that basketball and volleyball or any other means of merely keeping kids off the streets will not cure. The church can only supplement what parents—led by fathers—have the primary responsibility to do: "nurture them in the chastening and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:1–4). I say again: Parental responsibility is primary—as go the parents, so go the children and the home.

They are evangelistic tools

This ploy is likely the one most consistently used to justify the widest range of fads and innovations. After all, who can object to evangelism? Actually, this is by no means a new justification for introducing foreign elements into the religion of Christ. Those who foisted the American Christian Missionary Society upon the church 150 years ago used *evangelism* as their excuse and selling point. The fundamental objection to that extra-church organization and to the fads and innovations of the present is the same: there is no Scriptural authority for them (Col. 3:17). Admittedly, there are other bases of objections, but till we get past this one we need not bother with others. If a doctrine or practice is not authorized by Scripture, it should be stopped dead in its tracks—and it will be by those who love Jehovah God and His Son. All of this reminds me of Jesus' severe rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees (Mat. 23:15). As they compassed sea and land to make their disciples, so the fad-mad brethren are using every imaginable gimmick and gadget to attract their followers. The result is hardly better, either: The Jews made their converts more evil than they were to start with, and the Change Agents and their fads actually lead precious souls away from, rather than to the Lord and His Truth.

Modern times demand modern ways

This is the “cultural argument” and it goes something like this: “We live in a different time and culture from those in which the New Testament was written. Modern people are just not interested in the old ways. If we want to keep up with the growing religious bodies, we must do the things that attract and appeal to people.” The grave problem here is that the Lord planned and established His church just as He wanted it to be perpetually. It is changeless in its nature, its worship, its organization, and its work, which fact is rooted in the immutability of the New Testament itself. The Word that produces the church is to be preached “even unto the end of the world” (Mat. 28:20). Neither man nor angel dare preach “another gospel” (Gal. 1:8-9). “The faith” has been delivered “once for all” (Jude 3). Our liberal brethren view the church as a chameleon institution that should constantly change with and adapt to its surroundings in order to maintain an appeal to the secular mind. However, (1) if the Word is the seed that produces the church, and it is (Luke 8:11), (2) and we dare not change the Word, then it must follow (3) that we dare not change the church. In fact, as long as the doctrine of Christ remains pure the church will also; doctrinal apostasy is the father of apostasy in practice. If Moses was sternly warned of God (concerning the inferior tabernacle) to “make all things according to the pattern” (Exo. 25:40; Heb. 8:5b), how much greater the implied warning that men do so concerning the superior institution of the church (Heb. 8:6). The Change Agents have it all wrong. The church is to alter its surroundings with Truth and righteousness, rather than be altered by the worldliness, immorality, secularity, and idolatry that surround it.

Likely other justifications are being given for the restructuring of the church in all of its features and facets, but these will give the reader a fair sampling of those being offered.

Objections to the Fad Mania

It must be admitted that many, perhaps already the majority of the Lord’s people, have fallen in behind and are marching in lock step with the vanguard of the Change Agents. These followers are not only following; they are cheering their leaders on, apparently insatiable in their hunger for more and more changes. However, not all have been so easily influenced. As there was in Elijah’s time a remnant of seven thousand that had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kin. 19:18), so in spiritual Israel there remains a sizable segment (far more than 7,000) that has refused to make the pilgrimage to the annual festivals at Tulsa and Nashville, or to kiss the big toe of a Shelly or Lucado. In spite of every attempt to belittle, discredit, and intimidate those who have resisted their sinister plot to destroy the bride of Christ, there are still some of us who

refuse to be silenced. Those of us who object to the relentless introduction of things different, novel, innovative, and sometimes downright bizarre into the worship, work, and organization of the church do so on the basis of a number of principles, such as the following:

Sectarian and denominational sources

We are fully aware that the mere fact that a false religion teaches or practices a certain thing does not necessarily make it false (we need not climb in the windows of our buildings because Baptists walk in their doors). However, there are many things common to denominationalism that are wrong in their very nature because they are the essence of the monster. That is, they are the very doctrines and practices that represent rebellion against the King of kings and His Divine law and that produce denominational and sectarian churches. Many, if not most, of the fads earlier listed and described are of this very character. These doctrines/practices that are so cherished by the liberals originated with men who have not a clue about the meaning of the “one faith,” “one baptism,” or “one body” (Eph. 4:4-5). It will not turn the church into a denomination to enter a building through the door, even as denominational bodies do—entering a building through a door is not innate to denominationalism. However, it most certainly **will** turn the church into a denomination to adopt false doctrines and the practices that proceed from them **which are innate to that institution!** All of these fads have the wrong source—they are from men rather than from God.

Convoluting emphasis

Some, if not most, of the fads that have been discussed relate far more to the flesh than to the spirit of man. They are driven by fickle feelings and emotions rather than by reason, thought, and conviction rooted in Divine revelation. They represent what man wants rather than what God has specified; they are man-centered instead of God-centered. Some of the earliest pleas for use of instrumental music in worship in the past century were unabashed appeals to the flesh: it is fashionable, it will make the singing sound better to our ears, and the like.¹³ The Pentecostal-inspired clapping, shouting, hand-raising/fluttering, and body-swaying are all the children of raw emotion rather than revelation. The clamor for numbers-at-any-price, largeness, gymnasiums, and such like are geared to a *keeping-up-with-the-Joneses* worldly ambition and a carnal concept of “success.”

The fads involving the church directly sponsoring and paying for entertainment and recreation programs, facilities, and directors is an unvarnished appeal to and satisfaction of

fleshly appetite. The many marriage, divorce, and remarriage errors encourage the indulgence of the flesh in forbidden relationships rather than the control of the flesh as God has ordained. To lust for speakers/preachers who are “dynamic” and whose hearers almost swoon as they turn clever phrases (with no recognition that they are dispensing doctrinal poison at worst, or sanctified silliness at best), is emotion gone to seed. The *fellowship-everyone* drivel is a raw emotional reaction in those who do not want to be called “narrow-minded,” “judgmental,” or “exclusivistic.” They thus sacrifice the doctrine of their crucified Lord in order to escape the disapproval of friends and peers – alas, the vainglory of life (1 John 2:16)! The flesh of the proponents of liberalism has lusted against the Spirit and His directives (Gal. 5:17), and the flesh has won! They are sowing to the flesh and they “shall of the flesh reap corruption” (6:8).

Employment of the wrong drawing power

This objection overlaps the previous one but is still worthy of separate treatment. The Change Agents not only do what they do because of their own fleshly desires, but all of the tricks and machinations they use to draw crowds to and get people in their buildings appeal to improper motivations in sinners as well. The use of circus tactics (clowns, juggling and magic acts, et al.) is hardly an appeal to the spiritual nature and needs of men. The staged performances of professional or amateur entertainers, whether musical or dramatic, may amuse or satisfy the flesh, but will profit the spirit none whatsoever. When a church starts down this road it has no end. People who are attracted by fun and games or coffee and donuts will expect to continue receiving them or something better. And when the “something better” is offered across town by the “Community Church” or the “Bible Church” they will migrate to the greener pastures.

The fatal flaw in all of this fleshly approach (besides the fact that it is fleshly) is that it substitutes human attractions for that which God supplied for us. It fails to distinguish the sacred from the profane, one of the very sins for which Judah was condemned to exile in Babylon (Eze. 22:26; 44:23). Jesus sternly warned the multitudes not to follow Him for “loaves and fishes,” but for “the food which abideth unto eternal life” (John 6:26-27). He knew that “coffee and donut,” circus-act “followers” were really not followers at all, the truth of which is proved by the desertion of many at the end of His sermon of “hard sayings” (vv.60-66). Men have not changed whatsoever from that time to this. The Lord made it plain: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto myself” (John 12:32). The Lord is not promising universal conversion by His crucifixion (cf. Mat. 7:13-14), but that the cross will be His means of appeal and that those who are truly drawn to follow Him will be drawn through the cross.

Paul instructed the Ephesian elders that it was God's Word which was able to build them up and to give them their inheritance (Acts 20:32). The Thessalonians were called to salvation and sanctification through the Gospel (2 The. 2:14). Is there any other way to be truly "called"? The Gospel, not the puny inventions and ploys of men, is still the "power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16). Do these liberal brethren really believe that they can save anyone through "another gospel" besides the one Paul preached (Gal. 1:8-9)? Thus, Paul told the Corinthians, "I determined to know nothing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). For the same reason, he strictly charged Timothy to "Preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:2). Admittedly, the pure Gospel Truth that centers on the cross will not draw as many people as a circus every Sunday, but those who are thereby drawn will be there because of spiritual, rather than fleshly, motives. There will be some hope of teaching such folk how to go to Heaven.

Confusion of personal and church responsibility and work

Those who would fasten upon the church the sponsorship of recreational activities and gymnasiums not only place things of the flesh before those of the Spirit, but they also confuse the work and responsibility of individuals and families with those which the Lord gave the church. There is admittedly some overlapping, but still, the distinction is clear. The primary responsibility of the church is to preach the Gospel to the whole world (Mat. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16). The rearing of children, involving their care and protection, their education (secular and spiritual), the provision of their physical necessities, their recreation, and their discipline are all **family** responsibilities (Eph. 6:1-4; Col. 3:20; 1 Tim. 5:8; et al.). If the church is saddled with responsibilities belonging to the family, it must fail in its own work, and the world will go without the Gospel. We must let the family be the family. We must let the church be the church. The fad-mongers seriously confuse them.

Universal opposition by previous generations

The foolish fads and innovations discussed above (along with a host of others) were universally rejected and opposed by those who have gone before us, except for the occasional radical few who apostatized. Their doctrines and practices were clearly recognized for what they were—the doctrines and commandments (and their resultant practices) of men that were characteristic of denominational bodies. This is not to say that we should favor or oppose any thing simply because many brethren before us have done so—all things must be measured by the infallible Word (1 The. 5:21). This standard is the very one by which our forebears measured the ways of men and because of which they opposed them. A constant theme of the late Guy N. Woods in our conversations and correspondence over the last few years of his life was that he

never thought he would live to see the day when our brethren were saying and doing the things he was hearing and seeing.

It is still all but incredible to see that doctrinal Truth which has been fought for and established at such great sacrifice by so many for so long means nothing to these Postmodernists. Never mind that Godly men and women suffered extreme hardship to advance the Truth and that some had their very lives threatened if they did not cease to proclaim and defend it. These religious misfits, who are not worthy to stand in the shadow of those godly saints, blithely barter the very birthright of the souls of men for a mess of doctrinally poisonous pottage. Our spiritual predecessors rejected and opposed the fads of sectarianism on Scriptural grounds, and so must we.

There is no Scriptural authority

If you forget all of the other objections, but remember this one, you will have done well. This is the fundamental objection to the fads of men that embraces all of the others. Such practices are not authorized either by New Testament implication, example, or direct statement. “Oh, but the New Testament does not forbid them,” someone may say. Yes, it does – if it does not authorize them. “Does the Bible forbid it?” is a good question. The Bible does explicitly forbid some things (e.g., Eph. 5:11), and we must respect such teachings. However, the Bible also forbids some things implicitly. Hebrews 7:14 uses the Old Testament command that Jewish priests were to be of the tribe of Levi to prove that the Lord was thereby forbidden **by implication** to be a priest on earth (8:4) because He was of the tribe of Judah. The better question is, “Does the Bible authorize it?” If it does not, then we violate the will of Heaven to practice it. The important question about any and every doctrine, practice, and method must be, “Does the Bible authorize it?” The words of Paul remain unchanged: “And whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17). The fads that are engulfing churches by the hundreds cannot pass this unfailing test.

Conclusion

Changes in and of themselves are neutral, being neither innately good nor evil. However, the fad-merchants have practically enshrined change of any and every kind as their idol. Their credo is “change for the sake of change.” We should congratulate them for their consistency in labeling themselves “Change Agents” – an accurate assessment indeed. They

really do not seem to care about what changes are made as long as they can introduce something that is unlike what has been done before.

Beware of those who want to start changing things, even innocent and innocuous changes, without sound reasons for doing so. The apparently “innocent” changes may be only the initial steps of a subterfuge by a Change Agent for substantive changes toward which he is working. If you doubt my word on this, perhaps you will listen to one of the godfathers of the Change Agents as he tells his flunkies how to overhaul a congregation:

Strategy one: **Weave!** Teach new ideas for a while, **stretching** your church out **beyond comfort zones**. But when you feel your church approaching the **limits of tolerance, back off!** Talk about **familiar and safe things** for a while. Then, **move back out to the cutting edge again. Weave in and out**, first, **with new ideas**, then as you actually implement **new practices**.^{[sic]¹⁴}

One strategy for avoiding the fads is to be able to recognize and identify them. This requires reading some trusted Gospel papers and attending (or at least reading the books of) lectureships that stay on the cutting edge of brotherhood developments. When such fads are suggested we need to respectfully ask the Change Agents (even if they are elders or preachers) (1) why their proposed change is needed and (2) where is the Scriptural authority for the change? If there is no real justification for the change, we should be suspicious. If there is no Scriptural authority of the change, we must oppose it.

The Colossians were in grave danger of being spoiled through “philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ” (Col. 2:8). This is an accurate description of what brethren by the tens of thousands are allowing the Change Agents to do to them with their multitude of fads. Ironically, many of these thousands are applauding the very men who are leading them to their destruction (Mat. 15:14), thereby engaging in a sort of spiritual suicide. We would all do well to heed the wisdom of Solomon on this subject: “My son, fear thou Jehovah and the king; and company not with them that are given to change” (Pro. 24:21).

Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated. 17
2. W.E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1966 rep.), s.v., “new,” 3:109-10.
3. Norm Petersen, “Gadgets, Gimmicks, and the Gospel,” *Putnam City [OK] Power Lines* (September 30, 1984), p. 3.
4. The writer must, for the sake of full disclosure, admit that he at one point several years ago threw his support behind the attempt to reach people through “bus evangelism” where he served as local

evangelist. However, it became apparent after a few months that such served to provide many hours of hard work for a few members of the church and to provide a free baby-sitting service for several parents who were glad to get their children off of their hands for a few hours per week. As an evangelistic too it was an abysmal failure.

5. Perhaps the leading proponent of this fad in churches of Christ is self-proclaimed "Change Agent," Lynn Anderson, *Navigating the Winds of Change* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1994).
6. *Christian Reflections*, ed. Stanley Lockhart, bulletin of Johnson St. Church of Christ, San Angelo, TX (March 22, 1987), p. 2.
7. A lengthy report of the Otter Creek performance, along with the listing of some of their concert dates, was taken from their internet website: www.fullaccess.com.
8. *The Messenger*, bulletin of 10th and Broad Streets Church of Christ, Wichita Falls, TX (January 21, 1982).
9. For a study of this practice and documentation of some congregations who employ it (including at least one that generally has long had a conservative reputation), see the author's "Reevaluation/Reaffirmation of Elders?" *Leadership*, ed. Michael Hatcher (Pensacola, FL: Bellview Church of Christ, 1997), p. 83.
10. This was done in events leading up to the latest Nashville Jubilee and during some of the Jubilee events themselves. See J.E. Choate, "An Anecdotal Update of Nashville Jubilee, Inc." *Contending for the Faith* (August 1997), p. 5.
11. Petersen, p. 2.
12. From transcription of audio tape.
13. See the authors' chapter, "Is Instrumental Music an Aid?" *Music in New Testament Worship*, ed. Gary Colley (Austin, TX: Southwest Church of Christ, 1995), pp. 288-321.
14. Anderson, p. 173.

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