

A New Thing

What do mini- skirts, belly shirts, pet rocks, Xbox, bell bottoms and mohawks have to do with the Evangelism Explosion, spiritual warfare, holy laughter, The Prayer of Jabez, Promise Keepers, purpose driven lives, “hot sex” sermon series, and the Emergent Church? These are two lists of fads, one secular, and one ecclesial. When placed side by side such lists expose a dangerous mask the Church seeks to wear in its attempt to be relevant. The “church”, in its desire to attract the world to its message, all too often ends up being like the world. The “church” is every bit as faddish as the general culture. The fads are different, to be sure, but the pattern of attracting people by offering something new is a common method. This method bears with it dangers that the Church ignores at its peril.

I. The Church is every bit as faddish as the general culture.

When Jimmy Carter went on the cover of TIME magazine as a born again Christian, (November 15, 1976), Christianity suddenly became popular. *Newsweek* magazine christened 1976 the “year of the evangelical.” The Church was “in” with the world, and the world was in the Church. One of the most obvious results of this association with the world was the growth in popularity of fads in the Church. While the Church may have always suffered under the influence of fads, at this time two new forces developed that changed how the Church saw itself. First, the Christian publishing industry blossomed. Bible book stores began to spring up all over. The “religious book” slice of the market flourished. Secondly, the Christian music industry recognized a viable market among young people that were looking for something new. Christian music began to pound out of the boom boxes alongside hard rock. Christian artists began to court fan bases as rabid as those of mainstream musicians.

Many may have lauded this turn of events as a Christian invasion of two of the world’s most powerful propaganda machines. The end result proves the opposite. There was no imposition of Christian forms on these two industries. The language, the ceremony, the techniques, the money, even the dress was similar to that of the world. The Church assumed that if it were using worldly forms for its own purposes it would suffice as a victory.

The truth is that “Christian” publishing houses are governed by the profit margin every bit as much as their secular counterparts. This form of proclamation will not change its colors just because the message is said to be different. The “Christian” music industry is just that, an industry. It is governed by the market in the same way the secular music industry is. The bottom line of the market is money. The publishing and music industries, be they Christian or secular, have a vested interest in fads. The “new” thing makes money. Every product has a limited life span. Sooner or later their sales will reach a point of diminishing returns. That is why companies invest in product research and development. There is a constant need to have something new in the pipeline. The real art in such industries is carefully timing the next new thing so that it does not preclude maximum profits from the last new thing.

What happens when these market forces slip in, or are invited into the Church? The problem is not that we occasionally miss the latest fad, or even that the current fad may not be healthy for the Church. The problem is that the entire scheme is foreign to the image delivered in the Word of God. That image of the Church is not one of a market driven institution but of the body of Christ enlivened by a constant, unchanging Word. The result of these market forces is that the Church becomes something other than what God calls it to be.

Today the Church is not driven by the prophetic voice of its faithful pastors. It is driven by what will sell, the “newest” song or book that is topping the best-sellers charts. Thus, the Church is beset by wave after wave of the latest fad. We dutifully march to Promise Keeper rallies, deck our kids out with WWJD gear, pray the Jabez prayer, live the Purpose Driven Life, laugh a holy laugh and rock out with the hottest praise band in town. In each case, like the charlatans of Pharaoh in reverse, we have attempted to copy what the world has already perfected.

That is what is so ironic about this strange path the Church has taken. By its very name the Church is to be comprised of those that are “called out” of the world. In our rush to be “in” with the world, to be relevant, to be real, we have ignored our first call. We are afraid to be foolishness to the world. We have allowed that fear to drive us to rationalize our relevance in the world. Never quite accepting that the Gospel creates its own relevance, we equated relevance with sameness and became just like the world.

Why hasn’t the Church recoiled against this sameness? Where is the prophetic voice reminding us that to “be real” is to be who God has made us to be? Because we assumed the market-driven form of the world we concluded that a “new” thing meant something that was constantly different. I had a friend that perfectly portrayed this attitude. He was consistent in his prayers, always asking that God would do something “new,” something that we could all get excited about. He didn’t recognize the never-ending trap of his prayer, the pursuit of the new. In like manner, the Church is caught in a trap of its own making, the trap of the fad. When one fad begins to tarnish with age we can always pray, “O Lord we just want to see You do something new.”

Here is the core of the confusion. We are always looking for something subjectively new, that is, something that is changed in itself. We never dream that something objectively new could exist, that is, something that while staying the same in itself, could change us.

II. The new thing that God is doing is Jesus.

The Scripture is replete with texts referencing a “new thing” that God is doing. Unfortunately, cultural frameworks have done the lion’s share of the work in our interpretation of these texts. We tend to think of the “new” in terms of God changing His actions, instead of God changing us. One of the texts often interpreted using this cultural crutch is Isaiah 43:15-22.

“I am the Lord, your Holy one, the Creator of Israel, your King.” Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth the chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.” (Emphasis added)

There ought to be no confusion when God speaks about doing a new thing in this text. He leaves no room for us to think that He has come up with a new plan of action; that He has decided to become cutting edge. He immediately explains that the new thing is the creation of rivers in the desert to give drink to His chosen people. There is, of course, only one who can fulfill this prophecy. Jesus is the river in the desert of sin. He is the water of life. He is the new thing. In other words, the new thing God is doing is not a change in His actions. Jesus is the

same yesterday, today and forever. The new thing is not the latest fad God is using to keep our attention. The new thing is what God does in us through faith in Jesus. In Jesus the former things, the old things of sin, are not to be remembered because the blood of Jesus has washed them away. In Jesus we are a new thing that we never been before, forgiven.

Lamentations 3:22-23 is equally revealing. *“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.”* This text is not telling us that something in God’s mercy changes. There is no shadow or variation due to change in God. What is new every morning is the change that God’s mercy works in us. God’s faithfulness does not change. Luther expressed this action of God when he explained baptism in his Small Catechism. Baptism signifies that “the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die...and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

The Reformation certainly brought about many changes in the world. Still, Luther did not focus on the latest fad in order to determine how God was acting. He confessed that God acts through His unchanging Word as He brings people to new life in Jesus. Being steeped in God’s Word, Luther was reflecting an insight that King Solomon had revealed many years earlier. *“What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.”* (Ecclesiastes 1:9) The more the world changes, the more it stays the same. Only God can effect anything truly new. That He does in Jesus. This message is relevant to every age.

III. Mimicking the culture is deadly for the Church.

The Church of the twenty first century has become enamored of things new. It is not a benign love. It is deadly because the adoption of the faddish method of operation signals a fundamental change of identity. Jesus calls us out of the world. The market method of life calls us deeper into the world. This fundamental change is ultimately demonstrated in our behavior. Sociological studies reveal that the behavior of believers and unbelievers is virtually the same.

The “relevance by sameness” technique will result in a cross-less Church. This is not prophecy, it is simple market savvy. The Scripture clearly calls Jesus and His cross a stumbling block. *“...but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles...”* (I Corinthians 2:23) The cross, (though often worn as fine jewelry), is an instrument of torture and death. It is difficult to market suffering, mockery, strife and death as a fad. To the degree that the cross represents all of those things it must be ignored. Stumbling blocks must be removed before the product can be marketed. Give the people what they want and you can sell a lot of it. Sinners don’t want to take up the cross. They don’t want to be reminded of their sin. They want to “feel good” when they leave the building. That loving feeling is much easier to market than the cross.

Once the cross is gone there is nothing left. There may be an appearance of godliness but its power to create something new has been denied. People who attend “church” to feel good are in danger of never being killed by the law and subsequently raised by the Gospel. Congregations that intend to market the message by simply fulfilling felt needs will necessarily strip the Gospel of its death and resurrection power because they refuse to talk about sin. The people may come in droves for the sake of cutting edge worship, but there is nothing “new” happening in the pews.

Once the cross is gone the sameness syndrome is complete. No one, inside or outside the Church recognizes any difference in method or fundamental message. Then the sameness is

more deeply imprinted when the Church is given headlines for its latest marketing technique. The news media is particularly adept at noticing the course of fads. They also have a vested interest. The “new thing” sells the news. Here, for example, is a TIME magazine headline from November 2006. “Sugarcoated, MTV style youth ministry is so over. Bible-based worship is packing teens in the pews now.” Notice that the author of this article recognizes no cultural divide that separates the Church. He assumes that his astute observation of the turning of the times will be welcomed by all those who are on the cutting edge.

More recently Bill Hybels and his Willow Creek crew have confessed that marketing the church as a center of entertainment, while filling the sanctuary, did not necessarily make disciples. (*Reveal: Where Are You?* co-authored by Cally Parkinson and Greg Hawkins) Unfortunately, the survey data forming the basis for this work is not enough to convince them to abandon the market-driven approach. We can be certain that soon enough they will have identified the new thing that God wants them to do, and they will be prepared to sell it to the rest of us.

A US News & World Report article, (December 13, 2007), tried desperately to avoid the term “fad” as it described its latest observation of the Church. “Something curious is happening in the wide world of faith...more substantial than a trend but less organized than a movement... the development is a return to tradition and orthodoxy.” When the world notes orthodoxy as a trend or a fad within the Church something has gone terribly wrong. No one knows how long orthodoxy might be in vogue because like the Athenians of Paul’s day we “...spend ‘our’ time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.” (Acts 17:21)

IV. The Church proclaims the New Thing as it wisely responds to changes in its environment.

This is not a diatribe against all change. There is a difference between change and fads. Fads develop from dependence on the new and on the worldly criteria of success or profit. Such change is not necessary nor is it healthy in the Church. There is a time and a place for change. Change, within the Church, is necessary when it is based on evidence that calls for effective methods of communicating the Gospel.

Just as a physical body responds to changes, internal and external, so the spiritual body of Christ, the Church, responds to the changes it experiences. On a congregational level, (which is the only place one can actually see the Church), various changes are natural and healthy. A congregation responds to changes in membership, in pastorates, in the maturity of its members. These are internal changes that help the Church care for believers and unbelievers alike. A congregation will also have to respond to external changes such as the demographics of its community, its economic stability, and the favor or disfavor that the culture demonstrates toward the Church.

In such cases change will become necessary to maintain an opportunity to proclaim the Word. These changes will in no way remove the cross from the message of Christ. In fact, only changes that make the centrality of the cross clear will be accepted by the faithful congregation. The same Apostle that decided to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified also “became” (a very powerful change, indeed), different that he might save some. These changes are for the sake of the Gospel. That phrase will require some more work but at this point it will suffice to say that the Gospel gives the Church freedom to serve others in a ways that make the Gospel available to them.

The context in which people hear the Word of God will undoubtedly change through the years. That is one reason why God gave the Church Pastors. They are the prophets, so steeped in the Word of God that they may reliably say, “thus saith the Lord.” The prophet breathes in the Word of God and breathes out the application for his people and the world. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, he carefully gauges the setting in which he proclaims the Good News. He speaks the Law in just the right way so that it kills his listeners and the Gospel in such a way that it raises them to new life.

The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. (Isaiah 40:7-8) The Scripture clearly acknowledges that changes will take place in a sinful world. At the same time it proclaims a stability that a changing world desperately needs. His Word, the Word, never changes. It is this powerful, unchanging Word that creates faith in Jesus Christ so that we may truly experience a new thing!

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