

Institutionalism --- Then and Now (1)
Views of Why the Church Must Change
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Introduction: It is crucial for every Christian to have a heart that will change when corrected by the word of God.

- A. As we begin this series it is important that we all have a heart that is willing to submit to God. (**Micah 6:6-8; Matt 22:37-38**)
 - 1. Without this humility one cannot yield to Jesus as Lord. (**Luke 6:46**)
 - 2. Different kinds of hearts will produce different reactions to the same word! (**Luke 8:11-15**)
 - 3. Personally the word will become a life changing instrument in your life when you are convinced of its source. (**1 Thess 2:13**)
 - 4. I ask that everyone read the overview of this series to understand the goals and approach of these studies. The only change that men should make is that which comes from the Lord! Test this material! (**Acts 17:11**)
- B. When we speak of the church or the church of Christ in this material, I am referring to the Bible description of God's people.
 - 1. The people of God, the saved in all the earth comprise the church of Christ. (**Matt 16:18; Eph 4:4-6**)
 - 2. There are other writers who will refer to "the Church of Christ" in a denominational way, i.e. a group of Christians within other groups of Christians.

I. Bible Examples of Change --- Good and Bad.

- A. All good change comes from repentance!
 - 1. Repentance is defined as a turning of the will that results in a turning in one's life! (**2 Cor 7:9-10; Acts 2:38**)
 - 2. Repentance has a source, the word of God! (**Matt 12:41**)
 - 3. Any change that does not come from this source is not from God! How then will I know if a man is encouraging me to follow God or men? By a plain appeal to the word of God!
 - 4. A right heart will overcome the prejudices of one's own "religious traditions" and "personal cultural prejudices". If the heart is not right, God's changes will be ignored. (**Acts 7:51-54; Acts 17:4-5; Acts 28:24**)
 - 5. What kind of appeal is the agent for change making? Is it the Bible or a list to appeal to your flesh? (Example: How bad brethren have been!)
 - 6. The cross of Christ is the heart of all change. (**Gal 2:20; 6:14**)
- B. There is a change that leads you into captivity. (**2 Pet 2:18-19**)
 - 1. One great problem we face is that many have no grounding in principle! These people make lots of changes, but rarely for good. (**Eph 4:14**)
 - 2. When you are not grounded in the word it becomes difficult to see when men are twisting God's word. If you are given to judge by how you feel

and how pious one looks before you, you will fall into captivity!
(2 Cor 4:2)

3. One of the hardest things to see is when brethren who show you great affection may also lie to you “for your good”. (2 Cor 11:13; Col 2:8)
 4. What will the church become? Whatever brethren will let it! What kind of building has been done in the past will greatly influence what will be. (Jer 5:29-31)
- C. Beware when leaders diagnose problems among Christians and then present an agenda based on the flesh.
1. We should listen to their diagnosis, because they often are right! The best false teachers will prey on our own real weaknesses. We better listen so we can make the right kind of change. (Prov 18:13)
 - a. Our unwillingness to hear shows a heart problem with us.
 - b. In fact the bad attitudes of those who hold the truth will only encourage others to go another way. (Rom 2:22-24)
 2. All who offer solutions to problems among brethren must have their solutions examined by the scriptures!
 3. Too often there is a “Trojan Horse” solution that will only bring greater damage.
 4. Consider the example of King Jeroboam. (1 Kings 12:26-29)
 - a. Why did he say Israel should change?
 - b. Why did he really want change?

II. The Evidence Presented for the Need for Change.

(Note: These arguments are made by some and should not be viewed as a blanket statement covering all who support institutions)

A. Arguments made in the 50’s and 60’s

1. **“Where there is no pattern we have freedom to act.”**
2. **“I would rather be doing something than nothing.”**
3. **“We will achieve greater results as long as brethren will go along.”**
4. **“Carnal incentives are necessary to attract people so we can teach them. Times dictate that we must use these new things to reach others.”**

B. Arguments made today

1. **We live in a rapidly changing culture.**
 - a. There is a pace of change unparalleled in history.
 - b. Society has a greater ignorance of the Bible.
 - c. Divorce, illegitimacy and single parent families are at a level that is unparalleled in human history.
 - d. There is an influx of world religions and a discounting of Christianity.
 - e. Bible ignorance has never been higher in our country.
2. **The makeup of the church has changed.**

- a. The “baby-boomer” generation needs a different kind of worship than the “world war two generation”.
- b. “Because of video games and television we must have more than the Bible to keep our young people.”
- 3. **There are serious problems in how the church is doing its work.**
 - a. The “Church of Christ” has stopped growing and will become extinct.
 - b. The “Church of Christ” has fallen into a “blind traditionalism”. We have become like the Pharisees.
 - c. There have been fusses, fights, and divisions among Christians where I have worshipped. I am tired of it.
 - d. Sometimes “surveys” are used to slander “conservative churches” (i.e. Those who oppose instrumental music).

III. Change Must always be Modeled after the Unchangeable.

A. We serve a God whose character and righteousness is unchangeable.

(Mal 3:5-7)

- 1. There are those who in their desire to produce change will attempt to change the character of God! This is a huge mistake. **(2 Cor 11:2-4)**
- 2. This is the same God of both the Old Testament and the New Testament!

B. God has given us an unchangeable word! **(Rev 22:18-19; Mt 24:35; 1 Pt 1:22-23)**

- 1. If anyone has become a Christian, it is because he has responded in the same way that every Christian throughout time has, including Paul! **(Rom 6:3-4)**
- 2. Sometimes I have seen a bumper sticker: “If God seems father away than He used to be, who moved?”
- 3. Many brethren have drifted away from a commitment to God’s word and then decided that the principles they have drifted from are the cause of their problems!

What's Wrong With Us?

Ed Harrell

I get that question a lot. People know that I travel, and they are anxious to learn how “we” are doing in other places. Sometimes the question has a denominational sound, but most often it reflects a genuine interest in the Lord's work.

My answer, in brief, is that nothing is wrong and that “we” are doing very well. In my lifetime the number of churches where I am welcomed to preach, and the number of Christians associated with them, has probably increased ten times. There are vital, dynamic, growing congregations all over the country.

It seems to me that the “what's wrong” question is asked most passionately by Christians in local churches where things are not going very well. We are all inclined to universalize

our gloom. Too often, the purveyors of gloom, particularly among preachers, tell more about themselves and their work than about the general state of the church.

Liberal denominations have been beset by declining numbers for several decades and their leaders have produced an unbroken string of "What's Wrong" books. A recent article in the *Christian Century*, written by a liberal preacher, described what was wrong with the "What's Wrong" books. I thought both his observations and his remedies were insightful.

First, he suggested that denominations lose members because "they do not take the local parish seriously." Liberal Protestants are so attached to denominational bureaucracies that they forget that the boards, conferences, and executives mean nothing without local churches. The problem of decline, the writer surmised, must be "addressed at the local level."

Undenominational Christians should heed the warning. The only way to address the question of how "we" are doing is at the local level. I suspect that there is a direct relationship between how a local church is doing and how much it sees itself as an independent, autonomous body of Christians. In congregations where the public focus is on the "brotherhood," not much is likely to be happening in the local church. As a congregation declines, it can easily rationalize that the "brotherhood" is sick and that some national remedy must be found. No, something needs to be done locally.

Second, the *Christian Century* article notes that "the 'what's wrong' books are often more interested in placing blame than in finding solutions." Denominational troubles spawn a search for scapegoats and an outbreak of finger-pointing. The problem, however, is that "the ecumenical denominations have not evangelized since the first wave of circuit riders fanned out across the frontier. Our people raised large families, got children converted at a revival meeting around age 12, and thought they were doing evangelism."

I recognize that scenario. In too many gloom shrouded congregations there is a relentless search for bogeymen to point the finger at—a lack of love for the truth on the part of the brethren, the national decline in morals, the lure of television. Too often, these are lame excuses. Except in cases where population shifts curtail the opportunities of a local church, most churches die because they quit trying to live. Boggled neck-deep in an accusatory negativism that blames others for their failures, they have lost the zeal that breeds success.

Third, the *Century* article notes that denominational critics acknowledge that "parish pastors are part of the problem but not part of the solution."