

When Change Is the New Normal

A call to remember the timeless relevance of the gospel

D. Brent Laytham

It feels like the winds of change are blowing pretty hard these days. In response, some churches try to dig storm cellars, while others want to learn parasailing. Both reactions risk letting our imaginations be captured by change rather than captivated by Christ. This article will focus mostly on the parasailors—those who assert that changing times require an entirely new way of doing church. I’d like to suggest that we mostly have what we need for these or any other times—a Holy Spirit and a servant Savior.

Pop culture gives us plenty of lines to express our sense that “we’re not in Kansas anymore,” including populist sayings like “fake is the new real” and “small is the new big.” The basic formula is simple to learn, yet infinitely useful. This is the new that. It can embody an astute observation about a significant cultural trend, such as “seventy is the new fifty.” Or it can offer a comedy formula for Jay Leno on *Late Night*. (Wait, Leno moved to prime time, which means “10 p.m. is the new 11:30.”) But whether we use it to point out dramatic changes in patterns of U.S. aging, or merely to adver-

tise the latest TV show, the formula itself is a regular reminder that we live amidst incessant change. Apparently “change is the new normal.”

Winds of Change

Some analysts suggest that the pace and scope of change are greater than ever before in human history. They may be right. I remember when my family got its first color television set; now my cell phone is a miniature TV. I remember when a segregationist ran for the White House; now our president is African American. I’ve seen the rise of WalMart, Viagra, and X-Box, and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Twin Towers, and the stock market.

Like me, you could also name symbolic events and dramatic changes you’ve lived through. Change feels to us like the wind—unexpected, powerful, and uncontrollable; dangerous or even deadly if we ignore it, but potentially beneficial if we can find a way to cope with it.

Another powerful metaphor was suggested by the journalist Douglas Rushkoff, who thirteen years ago said that

change had become so pervasive that humanity was like “a species undergoing mutation.” It’s a telling analogy, because it does far more than just symbolize the magnitude of change. It also suggests that there are really only two choices—adaptation or extinction. There are plenty of Christian authors who agree with Rushkoff’s assessment: the church, they say, must radically alter its identity and practice, or it will be blown away by the winds of change.

God’s True Wind

I’m suspicious of these kinds of all-or-nothing, change-or-die claims. Is it possible that they take far too seriously the winds of change, and dramatically undervalue God’s true wind of change—the Holy Spirit? The Spirit blows where God wills new life (John 3), not only sounding but empowering like a mighty rushing wind (Acts 2).

My suspicion that we’ve lost faith in the Holy Spirit has a historical source. In the nineteenth century, the famous evangelist Charles Finney decided that cultural change necessitated “new measures” for effective evangelism. Finney and those who followed him jettisoned the church’s traditional ways of worship, and put in its place a service of three parts—preliminaries, message, and harvest. Finney believed that this technique offered a foolproof pattern. If you start with the right kind of singing and then preach the right kind of sermon, you are guaranteed that your altar call will succeed. Notice the pattern: changing times call for new measures that guarantee success. Finney’s trust in technique essentially rendered the Holy Spirit obsolete.

I’m haunted by the ghost of Finney every time I read a book that says that changing times require new measures from the church. Of course none of these newer books would say, as Finney did, that the Holy Spirit is

superfluous. Indeed, they will probably say that we need the Holy Spirit for their new technique to really work. But the overall effect of their argument may have two unfortunate results. First, in terms of mood, it makes us more worried about winds of change than confident in the Holy Spirit. Second, in terms of response, it makes us more confident in a new technique than dependent on the Holy Spirit.

Am I suggesting that things are fine with the church, that we don’t need some radical transformation? Not at all! I am suggesting, though, that our primary motor for transformation is not adaptive techniques for coping with cultural change, but welcoming the Spirit who will lead us into all truth (John 16:13) and empower faithful witness (Acts 1:8).

So let’s grapple for a moment with one of the biggest changes in the U.S. cultural context—the transition from a monocultural to a multiethnic society. Does the church need a new strategy or

new techniques to meet this challenge? Hardly. Certainly we will have to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the church (Revelation 2:7), which certainly means that the privileged will have to listen to those who are being neglected (Acts 6:1). Moreover, we will have to listen as the Spirit tells us to eat together without making distinctions (Acts 11:12; cf. 11:3).

I believe that Acts 6-15 tells the story of the church’s first journey from monoethnic to multiethnic identity, as Jews and Gentiles learn to break bread together in Jesus’s name. The real catalyst for transformation is not cultural change, but the Holy Spirit. The means for transformation is not

a new technique or strategy, but an existing sacrament—breaking bread together in Jesus’s name. That sacrament must now be practiced differently, more faithfully, more inclusively, but it isn’t abandoned in favor of a new strategy. The church’s responsibility was not to find a new technique to cope with change, but only to stop hindering the Spirit (Acts 11:17), to stop impeding God’s Holy Wind of change.

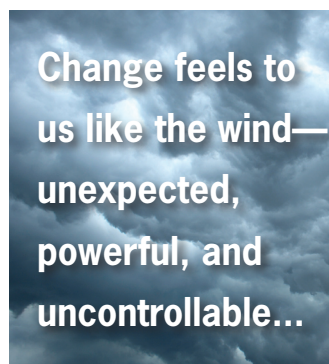
New Goods and Good News

Our economic lives are structured by the continual invention, production, marketing, distribution, and consumption of new goods and services. Living in such an economy impacts a whole lot more than our spending habits.

Over time it can structure our desires, form our expectations, even shape our hopes. It offers an identity and a goal, not just things to buy. It communicates a mood and a lifestyle, not just a marketing message.

In short, this economy typically patterns in us a deep commitment to novelty. Notice how this works. New products are constantly arriving to make us happy. New services are always promising to improve our condition. Marketers train us to expect, desire, and trust the next new thing. Commercials proclaim the good news that new goods can solve our problems. Print ads show us that the good look and the good life require the next new thing. Stores incessantly replace what’s new with what’s newer, while the economy constantly brings forth what’s next. Let’s admit it: iPod ads are evangelistic, Cialis is selling a way of life, both Macintosh and Microsoft ads aim for conversion. ➤

D. Brent Laytham teaches theology at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago.



A lifetime of participation in an economy selling newness can form in us an abiding faith that only the new can save us. Even if you're not a shopaholic, you've been subtly trained to hope for the upgrade, to desire the "new and improved." This orientation is not primarily an *idea* about the need for novelty, but rather an *attitude* about it. Before logic or analysis or reason go to work, there is already a powerful desire for novelty, an eagerness for newness, a life pattern of letting go of what is dated in order to grab hold of what is cutting edge.

Once novelty becomes our religion, our greatest fear is that we'll be left behind. Expressions like "that's so last week" are an indication of how com-

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mitted we are to whatever comes next, and how anxious we are about being outdated. When I did an online search trying to discover just how brief our cycle of obsolescence has become, I read a blog that said, "Twitter is so five seconds ago." Apparently, remaining cutting edge has become a matter of milliseconds. When I mentioned this discovery to my students, as an example our cultural anxiety about being out of date, several of them responded that "blogging is so over." And just like that, I was among the left behind.

One manifestation of our anxiety about being left behind is talk about relevance. In fact, the gospel is always relevant, because our risen Lord invites everyone into relationship with God. Even if I tried, I couldn't make the gospel relevant because it already is. Still, plenty of church leaders try. If you want the gospel to be relevant to the cartoon crowd, then you'd better turn Bible stories into VeggieTales. If you want the gospel to reach screen-

agers, then you must grab them on Facebook. Technology becomes the key to relevance. I noticed this attitude a decade ago, when enthusiasm for the *Jesus* movie verged on suggesting that God should have delayed the incarnation until the invention of VCRs.

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God's "Good New"

The first Christians believed that in the entire history of the world, there was only one new thing that mattered—the good news about the saving death and resurrection of Jesus.

They used the word "gospel" to communicate their belief that in Jesus God had done everything necessary to make all things new (2 Corinthians 5:17).

This word was already in use in their cultural world. It was used to

announce things like the birth of an heir to the emperor, or a mighty victory by the Roman army. Thus, it seemed fitting to use such a word to announce the birth of one who is Savior and Lord (Luke 2:10). It seemed right to use such a word to announce the victory of the Living One over death and sin (Romans 1:3-4). Choosing this word declared that the news that makes the world different isn't coming out of Rome, nor out of Washington either, but from Christ's empty tomb.

To make their point as clearly as possible, early Christians used the word in the singular even though it had always been used in the plural. Literally, we might translate it as "good new" or "glad tidings." Notice how the singular trips you up? It should, because its point is to say that the one new thing, the only new thing that will ever make the world whole, has already happened in Jesus Christ. We don't need to look anxiously for the next new thing, we don't have

to quest ceaselessly after relevance, because the new that really matters has already come in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Recognizing the singularity of the gospel ought to deliver us from addiction to novelty and anxiety about relevance. But it doesn't let us off the hook. Instead, it puts a cross on our back, precisely because this glad tidings requires embodied witness. God's good new is not a "message" that can be communicated in whatever technology is currently in vogue. Flesh is the one form that is adequate to this content. The Word became flesh (John 1:14), God's letter of love is written in our bodies (2 Corinthians 3:3), our scars witness to Christ's salvation (Galatians 6:17).

Any medium of communication that keeps us at a safe distance is inadequate to the gospel of a Lord who "suffered under Pontius Pilate." Contemporary technologies do precisely that—they use incredible speed and overwhelming power to cocoon us from real risk. Modern technology is amazing: in a nanosecond, Los Angeles connects to Ecuador, and Congo to Atlanta. But the very speed and power that shows me the world can also be used to hide it. With the click of a remote or a mouse I can insulate myself from face-to-face encounter with neighbor's need and world's hunger.

God didn't send a message, but a man. Christ didn't send a text; he sent a people—women and men who were Spirit-filled and Christ-formed. The church's servant love was and is the only relevance that matters. Our enfleshed witness is the ongoing gospel, God's one good new.

The winds of change are blowing hard these days, and the church does need to take a hard look at its faithfulness. But don't grab a shovel or a parachute, because we aren't called to dig storm cellars nor to parasail. We are called to faithful following. So grab Christ's cross and hold on for dear life, for God's glory, for neighbor's good. ■