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The Church in Today's World

Change is one of the primary identification marks of our society and culture. However, it is not the fact of change that poses the greatest threat—it is the speed of change. We no longer have the luxury of adapting gradually to major changes in our lives. We must flex, bend, and cope with a myriad of social, ethical, political, educational, physical, technical, and scientific changes that constantly bombard us. Tension, stress, and psychological dysfunction are common in our society.

There are a number of significant characteristics that now mark us as a people and as a nation. Although the following are not to be considered the only factors affecting us, they are major influences upon us as individuals, families, and churches.

We have become hermits in the midst of a mob. Apartment complexes and condominiums with extensive security systems are illustrations of how we can isolate ourselves in the midst of groups of people. That isolation can in turn, produce loneliness. In 1940, 60 percent of the US population lived in towns under 40,000 in population. A small town atmosphere was in evidence. Today 20 percent of the population lives there. Although cities have been with us for over five thousand years, the concept of a megalopolis, or urban concentration, is only thirty years old. In that context, the suburbs now join with the city as sites for homes and jobs, and the city atmosphere is expanded.

We have become pawns of the powerful. We have become a nation of people whose lives are governed by a few. Decision-making is more a national practice than a local or individual one. We have national television, newspapers, and periodicals. Even ethical and moral decisions in many cases have been prescribed by a minority.

We are speed conscious. Today man can travel at a rate exceeding 24,000 miles per hour, and the end is not yet in sight. Just a few years ago top speed was 800 miles per hour. One hundred fifty years ago man traveled at the amazing rate of 20 miles per hour with a pair of strong horses and a well-oiled carriage. In slightly more than two lifetimes man has doubled his speed of travel eight times.

Man has also become a collector and disseminator of knowledge. It is reported that in the 1500s, Europe produced approximately 1000 copies per year. In the US in 1950 there were 11,000 titles produced. By 1960 it had increased to 15,000, and by 1980 the number was over 33,000 titles, with hundreds of millions of individual copies. And that is only one medium. Data gathering by orbiting satellites boggles the mind. It has been estimated that less than 5 percent of the data can be filtered and utilized. We know more than ever before and are overwhelmed by it.

We are a nation of nomads. Thirty percent of the American public moves its place of residence every year. The extended family keeps in contact by telephone or tape recorder if it maintains contact at all.

We are in a service-oriented economy. Those that work in the serving professions, such as education, medicine, or governmental agencies, numerically far exceed those who work in the production of hard goods.

We are leveling off in population growth, which affects our future economy. It means that when the large population bubble that has been going through our society finally reaches retirement, it will have to be supported by a

much smaller group of income-producing workers.

New sources for energy, as well as new shortages, are before us. Communication will replace transportation. It has been suggested that a video-computer terminal in the homes of employees will replace the office building, parking lots, and car pools. If that comes to pass, it cannot but help increase both the isolation of individuals and the control by the few and powerful.

Scientific developments stagger us—such things as laser communication, holography, cloning, test tube babies, chemical and electronic developments, transplants of vital organs, biofeedback, and the all-encompassing computer, which learns, remembers, sees, reasons, walks, talks, plays, gets irritable, adapts to environment, and plans its own improvements. It is not a Star Wars or Galactica imagination for entertainment purposes. Those developments are with us now—some in advanced stages.

In the context of such a culture and society is the church. The church of Jesus Christ is the actual and spiritual fellowship of all who have been regenerated by personal faith in Jesus Christ. As Ted Ward has written, "It is more than an organization; the church is *supra-organization* in that it exists above and beyond the ordinary man-made social entities and enterprises" (*The Influence of Secular Institutions on Today's Family* [St. Louis: Family '76, 1975], p. 5).

The church serves as a primary instrument in the plan of God for the spiritual nurture of families and individuals. It shall endure until He comes to receive it to Himself at the end of the age. Its form and pattern are affected by its historical setting and cultural interactions, but its purpose is established in Scripture.

Today we find a variety of ministry styles within evangelical churches, each one arising out of a combination of theological, philosophical, and cultural factors. The traditional ministry usually is identified as having an

easily recognized organizational structure and set of beliefs and practices that are inherited from the past. It purports to strive for both the evangelization of the unbeliever and education of the believer.

A second church ministry style is known as aggressive, generally identifying churches who devote a considerable amount of their effort toward the course of evangelism. The program is highly structured, the leadership strong and visible, and numerical growth considered a primary indicator of success.

The third style is usually identified as renewal, emphasizing the organic life of the church and the maturing of the believer. A more informal approach is used for worship; shared leadership and a strong family emphasis are usually present.

Of course there are combinations of each of those and a broad continuum in each specific style. A particular problem that does arise is the tendency of one church to attempt to adopt another church's style or program without seriously studying the situation, principles involved, and consequences.

Churches today are also facing a fluctuation in attendance that appears to be tied to specific needs. Churches that are growing seem to be either authoritative churches, which meet the individual and family need for stability and direction in an age of chaos and constant change, or else the relational church, which meets the individual and family need for care and love in an age of fragmentation and loneliness.

One very disturbing trend in many of the growing churches is the increasing number of "spectator" Christians. They attend the morning service but nothing else. Many of the larger, growing churches are finding a widening gap developing between the Sunday morning attendance in church and the Sunday school attendance or attendance at other functions in which personal involvement is expected. Thirty years ago that was symptomatic

of liberal churches, but today conservative churches are blighted with the same problem.

In the area of finance there is an increasing crisis situation developing. The church is a cash-based organization that is attempting to survive in a cashless society. Plastic money is the order of the day, but the church still depends on the offering plate. Governmental pressure and the issue of removing tax exempt status for churches is already being talked about in the highest echelons of government.

While the number of individuals going to the mission field has increased slightly, the career missionary numbers are dropping drastically, with short term missionaries providing the buffer.

More churches today have multiple staffs to help meet the increasing specialized needs of congregations. There are also serious multiple staff problems of role confusion and conflict, and those are not limited to any geographic or denominational area. In addition, a concern for family ministry without a strategy and often without cooperation is apparent. Families are often too confused to know what they need or want. The occasional sermon on "The Family" does not meet the need. In fact, it often does little more than raise the guilt level of an already guilt-laden parent.

Today's average evangelical church member has a low view of the church and what it can do for him. He feels the same way toward the church leadership. Our people are warmly evangelical when it comes to personal attitudes, but immature theologically.

Printed materials for Christian growth, doctrinal truth, and biblical exposition abound on every side. Audiovisuals, a variety of methods, and some of the finest facilities ever imagined are available. Retreats, seminars, clinics, evening courses, home studies, video tape, filmstrips, and cassette recordings offer increased learning opportunities. More are being produced daily.

The church has become number-, technique-, and program-minded. Carnal and secular values have become the rule rather than the exception. We have been measuring success by the secular standards of physical acquisitions, size, and acceptance by our contemporary society. We have even gone to the Scriptures as proof texts for our positions. That is not to suggest that puny is pure and big is bad. It does mean, however, that the church must concentrate on its reason for existence and bring every concept, technique, and program under the careful scrutiny of the complete Scriptures.

First it should be noted that our present society and culture do not provide supports for either the church or the home. We cannot look to business, education, government, the world of sports and entertainment, or any other part of our culture to provide us with help or models in our Christian life and growth process.

Second, it is also true that unless we develop a biblical philosophy of ministry, a consistent Christian life-style, and a church-home program of support and mutual enrichment, we will only have a negative answer to our Lord's question in Luke 18:8: "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" We are in an age in which churches could well be compared to Israel as described by 2 Kings 17:33 (*New American Standard Bible*)—"They feared the LORD and served their own gods according to the custom of the nations from among whom they had been carried away into exile."

Many of today's evangelical churches have come to realize that a large number of the problems that do arise within the church are caused by poor procedures, ill-defined jobs, confused communication, and other organizational weaknesses. In the past, we have simply said, "It was sin," "Christians shouldn't act that way," or have used some other common phrase to dismiss a problem we believed was unsolvable unless a great spiritual revival would take place.

Although moral corruption is the ultimate cause of all of man's inability to get along with others, many of our organizational problems today are not necessarily the results of direct and immediate personal sin but are the failure to use the tools and skills that God has put at our disposal to allow us to function productively as human beings in organizational relationships. Those tools and skills are a reflection of the very nature and attributes of God. They include such things as clear communication, design, purpose, goals, organization, and rules or controls for proper behavior.

Later in this volume we will deal more specifically with some of the skills and procedures that consultants can and do use to help churches carry out their functions in an orderly and productive manner. There are a few things that should be noted at this juncture, however, to put in perspective the material that follows.

Note that the exercise of management principles and practices is not a substitute for the ministry of the Holy Spirit of God in believers' lives. Rather, it is a set of guidelines and activities designed to produce an orderly and properly functioning group. All motives, methods, and desired outcomes must be under the guidance and approval of God. What is clearly needed is for individuals and groups to be spiritually aligned with the Lord as they carry out their activities in a positive and proper manner.

Another factor that should be recognized is that pastors or churches who seek consultative help in carrying out their ministries are operating from positions of strength. The Scriptures instruct us to seek the counsel and wisdom of other believers. In so doing we should turn to those who have a good reputation and experience in the areas of need. In so doing we build up one another to greater godliness and service.

When it comes to a style of leadership or ministry, there is no single biblical model. There are common spiritual qualifications and godly attitudes that all true

Christian leaders must demonstrate, such as those set forth in 1 Timothy 2; 2 Timothy 2; Titus 1; and Matthew 20. A person's style of leadership, however, is that characteristic behavior that is an expression of a combination of factors—personality, prior experience, formal and informal training, and circumstances. An effective leader should be able to identify and get the most from his characteristics but also be flexible enough to modify his leadership style to fit the needs and expectations of the group. Leadership is never static. It is an ever-changing and adjusting experience.

Objectives are also essential ingredients in a properly functioning church ministry, for they provide both motivation and evaluative criteria. It is unfortunate that in most Christian organizations there are no carefully thought out objectives but only a series of programs that are seldom evaluated as to their true value.

One final major concern is the matter of organizational integration and interdependent support. That can best be studied from a systems management viewpoint. Once an organization understands the multiple forces that affect its actual operation, it can better pinpoint problems and make necessary adjustments. Also, the ability to project the financial needs of a group on the basis of projected programs makes individuals and groups more aware of their actual needs and more fiscally responsible.

The church today is in need. It needs the reviving of inner strength that comes from a total commitment to the inerrant Word of God and to the God of the Word. It needs a refreshing touch from the Holy Spirit, who delights in pointing people to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. It needs the revitalization that comes from a careful and thorough analysis of its purpose (reason for existence), its goals and objectives (those measurable and controllable targets toward which it should move), its programs (those diverse activities that are grounded in history and culture, but necessary to its effective opera-

tion), and its results (those Christ-mandated teachings of Scripture).

Churches are organizations and, as such, are subject to change, both development and decay. As with our personal health, it is a good practice to see a physician periodically for a checkup. That is preventative or developmental consultation. The same is needed in churches and other types of organizations.

Obviously, when a person is sick and hurting, a physician is necessary. So also with an organization. A consultant is one who, like a physician, attempts to diagnose institutional illness on the basis of what a church tells him and the instruments he uses. In the following chapter, the concept, role, function, and activity of the consultant are considered.