

Is Your Assembly Changing?

Benefits and dangers in recognizing your identity

Thank God, no! Some sincere and faithful believers hold that since the Word of God does not change, neither should their local assembly. This reaction assumes that at some point in their past their understanding of Scripture was complete and their diverse applications of Scripture basically faultless. It also assumes that a select group of Christian poets and song writers in the past have expressed everything that is needed, and therefore no new song books are necessary. It assumes that some arrangements which were good and appropriate to some culture in the past (like dress styles, colors, music arrangements, vocabulary and meeting times) are right for all cultures or for all time. They believe that their assembly was right at some point in the past, and it is their task to keep it that way. Changes are viewed with suspicion since they will most likely open the door for departure.

Praise the Lord, yes! Other sincere and faithful believers hold that a normal healthy assembly must remain in constant change as they seek to better understand God's Word, and as they try relate the unchanging Word of God to a changing world. Today's Christianity should definitely be expressed in current language in a culturally relevant way. But there are dangers. Some, for example, assume that all modern-language Bible translations are good and accurate simply because they are easier to read. Others assume that every new song that includes "I love you Jesus" must be healthy for the congregation. Some naïve believers think that culture is morally neutral. But there are strong satanic currents seeking to corrupt and degenerate all cultures (Eph. 2:2). They seek to distort or destroy any trace of God that may still be evident. In an effort to be relevant to our culture, we must not allow our culture to determine how the Bible should be interpreted. It should be the other way round: The Spirit of God desires to use Scripture to determine our contribution to culture. Let's not forget that Christianity was designed to be a counter-cultural movement (Jn. 15:19; Rm. 12:2). If we blend in to our culture, we shall cease to be salt and light to it.

Parable of a bakery

Many years ago, a group of dissatisfied bakers broke away from the established bakeries. Among their grievances was that existing recipes were restrictive and had little nutritious value. The exploration of older or creation of new recipes was virtually impossible because recipes were controlled centrally. These dissatisfied bakers formed a brotherhood which in time was referred to as the “no-label bakeries.” Since they did not require a license to function, such bakeries spread rapidly around the world. They made good bread, and those who ate were usually thankful and healthy. But soon the happy welcoming attitude began to change. Bakeries that did not belong to the “non-label bakeries” were denied the status of “bakery” and referred to simply as “shops.”

It is no surprise then, that soon most of these bakers, their children and their customers began to think that the no-label bakeries were the only bakeries in town. They would bake the standard good recipes which they inherited from their founding bakers and encourage all within their circle of influence to take serious care of their health, to eat only what was good for them, that is, buy their bread only from no-label bakeries. Most did and were satisfied. Occasionally, perhaps on vacation, some hurting or adventurous baker or customer would buy, eat and enjoy bread from a local “shop.” This was considered dangerous.

In time the Lord broke into this situation. He humbled the hearts and opened the eyes of many. They were delighted to realize that they were not alone, that the Lord had many other bakeries functioning in town. There was an enthusiastic rush to buy and eat everything new and different in the diverse bakeries. The freedom to explore all the bakeries and try all those new types of bread, cakes and biscuits caused an understandable degree of excitement. How to choose from so much variety? Many assumed that every product that had “Bible” in its list of ingredients was safe and of good nutrition value. They simply put in their baskets what was on sale, or what was most advertised or what the majority were buying. In moments of thoughtfulness, some customers would admit that frequently their purchases were motivated more by novelty, smell and looks than by a careful study of the ingredients. These rapid changes caused most no-name bakeries to experience a crisis of identity. They used to function well as small “monopolies” and now they were faced with “competition,” “multiple products” and a “free market.” What should they now do? Basically each bakery had to choose one of four possible strategies:

- (1) Don't change: Ignore or discredit all other recipes. No-label bakeries that change or implement a different recipe are to be avoided and downgraded to “shop” status.
- (2) Close down: Since there are so many bakeries in town, why should we continue with our no-label bakery? Encourage all the regulars to find another bakery.
- (3) Follow market trends: What do most people buy today? Study the success of other bakeries. Then discard all the old recipes and replace them with those that sell best.

- (4) Develop and grow: Be selective. Identify and keep the best of your old recipes, discard the eccentric or unhealthy ones, and discover and implement good recipes from other bakeries.

Clearly if some bakery in town is selling biscuits with glass in them, all customers should be alerted in a responsibly way. Dangerous error should be confronted, exposed and rejected (Gal. 2:11-16). If the Lord is indicating that it is time for your assembly to close down or merge with another, brave obedience is required. Before you settle for option (3), remember that popular bread is not always healthy bread. You may want to ask yourselves some searching questions: Have we inherited any teachings or practices that are Scriptural and are worth holding on to? Should we change the taste, the shape or the oven settings of some of our nutritious bread? If you have at least one good recipe that is not widely used by bakeries in your area, then option (4) may be the best way forward (Matt 13:52). Following strategy (4) will lead to bakeries that appreciate what the Lord has given them in the past and are still determined continue to learn and to grow. Such bakeries will offer good bread but will retain their own character or identity.

Being different is not always fashionable

Interestingly, there is a trend in modern society to reduce and remove differences. Three decades ago, it was very easy for a non-expert like me to identify a Volvo, Citroën, Ford and Volkswagen. To distinguish them now, I must look much closer. We are discouraged to think in terms of being British, French, German or Dutch, we should see ourselves as Europeans. It is politically dangerous to make any remark which distinguishes race or gender. Even essentially incompatible religions lose their distinguishing features as they are joined together as “faith communities.” Faith is what they have in common. What they believe in does not really matter. The trend among evangelicals is also that of eliminating differences. Music, mass media, growing para-church ministries and popular authors and speakers transcend barriers and encourage homogeneity in theology and practice. The elimination of many differences has been positive for Church of Christ globally. But is this always good? Arrogant, sectarian and dead communities do insist on being different from others, but is the opposite necessarily true? Must being different be equated with arrogance, sectarianism or being spiritually dead? Can the preservation of some differences be positive or perhaps even necessary?

Most Christian communities have inherited good things. Some of this inheritance may be Biblical but not very popular in today’s way of “doing” Christianity. Holding on to that inheritance will make them different from the rest. If this difference can be lived out without arrogance, without forming a sect around the difference, it will become a good example for others, it may be used by the Lord to protect and enrich the whole body of Christ. For example, congregations with a Puritan or Quaker background have inherited an appreciation for collective contemplation and meditation. Unlike the average evangelical church, they are not afraid to meet the Lord in times of silence. They should hold on to that distinctive and be a balancing example to us all. Congregations with a Moravian background have inherited from their fathers a selfless, sacrificial, nearly suicidal evangelistic zeal. Some of their pioneers would

sell themselves as slaves in order to share the gospel with African slaves on ships, and then would live, work and die with them on the fields. They should not let go of this zeal. They should not exchange it for our modern vacation-like, socially-motivated mission projects. If they retain their identity in a humble and open way, they will be an inspiration to us all. We need it!

Three boxes with recipes

Throughout the world, there are many assemblies with a Brethren background. I write from within that context. Surely we have much to learn from other Christian communities, but, have we inherited something distinctive which is worth holding on to? If yes, what? I encourage you to carry out the following exercise in small groups: Draw three boxes.

Box A: "Our good Bible recipes"

Box B: "Our 'damaging,' 'eccentric' and 'not useful' recipes"

Box C: "Helpful Bible recipes that we can learn from other bakeries"

Then encourage all participants to suggest items for each of the 3 boxes. Don't forget to also encourage the participation of the elderly. They are a living link to our past. The discussion that follows can be quite enlightening.

In **Box C** you will collect suggestions for improvement. Depending on gifts and experiences lived with the Lord, a group of believers can become a "model to all believers" (1 Thes. 1:7). We can definitely learn from other congregations. We are called to "Test everything and hold on to what is good" (1 Thes. 5:21). We can improve in those areas where we are weak. For example, we can learn from others how to provide better pastoral care for the flock, how to lead others to freedom sinful addictions and demonic influences, how we can better reach a lost world, and more.

Box B will contain a number of cultural and distracting issues. Insistence on some of these things usually puts out "the Spirit's fire" in the congregation (1 Thes. 5:19). For example, insistence on only one acceptable Bible translation or only "this" collection of songs. Requiring certain dress-code and religious vocabulary. Please take note that a Scriptural application at one point in time can be a hindrance to the work of God in another generation or in another culture. Man-made rules, however noble in origin, may become yokes on the necks of the saints. Responding to this human tendency to add to Scripture and complicate matters, James concludes: "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should *not make it difficult* for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15:10,19).

Happily **Box A** will probably contain many recipes. You will notice that many of these good recipes are shared with other sound Christian congregations in your area, such as preaching the gospel, collective worship and love for the Word of God. Some of them will be useful administrative recipes that help a congregation function in a "fitting and orderly way" (1 Cor. 14:40), like seating arrangements, formats and timetables. But you may also notice that there are some recipes in this box that are Bible based and not particularly common among other Christian congregations in

your area. Underline them. The inclusion of these recipes among the other good recipes is what makes your bakery distinct. They give your assembly its identity.

Recognizing your identity

Depending on what other Christian congregations look like in your part of the world, the following characteristics may form part of your identity: Sola Scriptura, that is, the Bible and only the Bible is considered to have final authority. Man-made traditions may be useful but have no authority. In Bible interpretation, a clear difference is made between God's dealings with Israel and the church. There is no distinction between a clergy or a professional group and the rest of the congregation. Every believer is encouraged to worship and to serve the Lord according to his or her gift, experience and moral condition. Leadership in the assembly is provided by a group of mature brothers, usually referred to as elders. Every true Christian is happily recognized as a brother and a sister in Christ. There is a clear Christ-centered gospel message, teaching that those who are born again remain forever children of God. Water baptism is taught and encouraged. The celebration of the Lord's Supper, normally weekly, is central to their spirituality.

Recognizing a new distinctive

When Christianity in your neighborhood persists on a new hype or rejects some Biblical principle, your assembly may acquire a new distinctive. For example, from the beginning of the church until a few decades ago, it was held by most Christian congregations that men and women hold different roles in the family and the local church. For some assemblies, the practice of this Scriptural teaching has now become a distinctive. More recently, in some parts of the world, holding on to the affirmation that homosexual practice is sin has also become part of their identity. Notice that what gives your assembly identity can change in time.

Benefits and dangers in recognizing your identity

There are various dangers in identifying and highlighting a set of features that give your assembly identity. It may promote an unhealthy feeling of uniqueness, encouraging an atmosphere of arrogance rather than thankfulness. Wrongly held, they may block our ability to learn from communities that do not share our characteristics. Furthermore, features of our identity may be given an importance or a status higher than is justified by Scripture. They may be used as a tool to isolate rather than to encourage, inspire and bless. There are clearly dangers in recognizing our identity, and yet, there are also important benefits. Taking stock of the good things you have, including that which is true to Scripture but not widely practiced in your area, can be a stimulus to study, teach, practice and not forget your good God-given inheritance. Awareness of identity will encourage the transmission of this inheritance to the next generation. Furthermore, a degree of clarity as to identity will serve as a platform to encourage congregations with similar identity to connect, interchange and encourage each other. Joining forces in a non-sectarian, non-

exclusive way can become a stimulus to model and promote Biblical principles for the enrichment and blessing of the whole body of Christ.

Conclusion

No Christian assembly is faultless in doctrine or practice, neither now nor at any point in its past. Perfection will come, but only when we reach heaven! Until that time comes, we should seek collectively to walk closer to the Lord, to submit more and more to Scripture, to care better for the sheep and the lost. It is impossible to improve without change! Change opens a door that allows things “in” and “out.” May the Lord grant us the **wisdom** to determine what we should “keep in,” “keep out,” “invite in,” “drive out” and then the **courage** to act. In God’s creation, all living organisms experience growing and renewing change. Your assembly is no exception.

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