**THE END OF AN ERA**

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I clearly remember a meeting I went to about twenty five years ago. A Christian faith leader was speaking to a group of ministers. He said, “I went to a church recently on a Sunday morning. As I sat in the back with the service unfolding, I wondered, ‘How does this feel to John or Jane Doe unbeliever who walks in here today?’” Everyone present was challenged, including me, and we agreed something must be done to allow for the feelings of the unbeliever who wants to come to church. And we also agreed that *church should be changed* so that unbelievers will want to come to church. And, as we have all seen, church indeed was changed so unbelievers will want to come to church.

Now we are living through the corona virus pandemic, and *no one is going to church*. It seems that the Lord, in His mercy, is giving the Church the chance for a reset. While we wait for things to get “back to normal,” I wonder if they will ever be “normal” again. I wonder if I want them to be “normal.” I believe that when we go back to church, we will be living the end of an era. I believe that many people will begin to show up who aren’t really interested in having the church change for them. They will be interested in coming to a church that has prayed intercessory prayer for them, wept before God for them, a church that will tell them the truth about sin, salvation, heaven and hell. This church will speak from humility and yet it will proclaim a message that has the power to change lives.

The Higher Good

Over these last twenty five years, I have heard and read many times the position that we should be more concerned about what the unbelieving person thinks. We should change our practice and our message to fit the mindset of the pre-Christian person. We may have to set aside our own likes and dislikes, and our own practices and methods because there is a “higher good.” By this we will be showing “love” and many will join our outpost. The potential perception of the unbelieving person is the key driver for ministry practice and presentation. I wonder how Jesus’ ministry would have turned out if He had adopted this practice. I’m sure Jesus wanted people to follow Him, but He didn’t seem very interested in the potential perception of the unbelieving person. Jesus spoke many things to His disciples alone, but He also spoke to the crowds. In Luke 12:4,5 He said, “And I say to you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!” In Matthew 9:36 it says, “But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd.” Jesus certainly related to lost people with compassion and mercy, unlike the Pharisees, who only wanted to judge them. But Jesus did not change His message or His practice to accommodate a potential perception. He just kept on calling for repentance (Matthew 4:17), healing the sick, and casting out demons. I believe that at the end of the era, we will have to lay “the higher good” aside, and preach like Jesus did.

Change the Message to Fit the Hearer

Church leaders near the end of the twentieth century discovered that large crowds of people could be gathered if you just let them dictate the terms of the message. They thought they had discovered something new. And its application to church services and messages was new. But under the surface, it seems strangely reminiscent of a phenomenon that emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was called the New Hermeneutic. Please don’t be afraid of the word hermeneutic. It simply means a way, or method of interpreting texts, especially the Bible. The “old” hermeneutic operated with the assumption that the text had an inherent meaning within it. The task of the hermeneut, or interpreter, was to discover that inherent meaning and lead it out. It was believed that this exegetical meaning would have power to change the hearer or reader when explained and applied. But now the New Hermeneutic, inaugurated by a man named Schleiermacher, changed everything. Now the quest is no longer to discover meaning that is already there. Under the New Hermeneutic, the hermeneut (interpreter) brings the meaning with him/her, and finds it reflected in the text. In fact, in some versions of the New Hermeneutic, the interpreter is the meaning. Wow, what a liberating view!! You are no longer bound to pre-existing meanings in an ancient text, *you are the meaning*. So really, nobody is really ever wrong. You may be less right or more right, but who can say that your own personal meaning is wrong? The message of the text is what the interpreter wants it to be. Sound familiar? The church growth movement centered in the seeker sensitive methodology has been doing exactly this for over twenty years!

But what if the text we are most concerned with, the Bible, keeps on insisting that there is right and wrong; there is sin and salvation; there is heaven and hell? No person in his/her natural state wants to be told the truth about sin, or hell, or the wrath of God. So we just don’t tell them about those unpleasant “details” of the Bible?? What if their eternal destiny depends upon repentance leading to conversion, and being made a new creation?

What do we Lose When we Change the Message?

Before we state what we lose by changing the message, let us understand what we gained. Churches were filled with people, sometimes thousands of people. Western society was offered a positive, loving message that people wanted to hear. But now all those churches are empty, and some day the people will be coming back. That is why I say that we are at the end of an era. We lost the power of God to change lives. We lost weeping at the altar in confession of sin. We lost conviction of sin, and perhaps the greatest loss was that of the fear of the Lord. Now God is everyone’s buddy. Let me be clear. I had an encounter with God in 1997 that took me from being a Pharisee to being a lover of Jesus. I was given a mandate to preach and teach the Gospel with the unconditional love of the Father. In the last twenty years, I have seen this love unleashed to bring thousands to Jesus with weeping and repentance. I have seen this love so strong it caused the deliverance of severely demonized people. I am learning how to love God and love sinners. I am also learning to hate sin, because sin separates people from God and sends them to hell for eternity. I had to learn to hate my sin before I could help other people hate theirs. And this may be the greatest love, to help other people hate sin.

When the apostle Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, he did not concern himself with a potential perception of the crowd. They had already accused he and the others of being drunk (Acts 2:13) because they were speaking in other tongues. Why didn’t they stay in the upper room with this strange phenomenon? Didn’t they know people would have a negative response? And shouldn’t they be concerned that after hearing the tongues, these people would not want to go to church? This didn’t seem to bother the 120, and when Peter began to preach, a large crowd gathered. And Peter told them the truth in love. Acts 2: 23, 36-38 says, “Him (Jesus), being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death;…Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ. Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’ Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let everyone of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” And on this great day, 3000 people repented and were forgiven of their sins.

What Will **They** Think?

Most people of my generation heard their mothers ask this question many times. Some of us answered with our own question, “Who are they, anyway?” The history of changing the message because of potential perceptions is not a good one. In 1939, the Assemblies of God denomination ceased issuing ministerial credentials to African-American candidates because, “Some ministers in the South expressed concern that they would have difficulty reaching their unsaved neighbors who harbored racial prejudice, if the AG became known as an integrated denomination.[[1]](#footnote-1)” So we observe the “higher good” of overlooking racial prejudice, even enforcement of Jim Crow laws because white unbelievers will be perceived to be harder to reach?? Really? And who teaches them to abandon their racial prejudice once they come into the church? The Southern Baptist Convention has had its own (similar) experience with race and potential perceptions.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Perhaps the best loving balance on this subject of potential perceptions is struck by the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 14:23-25. He says, “Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are idiotes[[3]](#footnote-3) (uninformed people) or apistoi [[4]](#footnote-4) (unbelievers), will they not say you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.” First notice that Paul does not say that tongue-speaking should cease because it might offend the unbelievers or uninformed. In fact, In I Corinthians 14:27, Paul allows two or three utterances in tongues, with interpretation. What Paul does forbid is for all the believers to speak in tongues at the same time, out of concern for the unbelievers and uninformed. Paul wants the unbelievers and uninformed to be undone by prophecies which disclose the secrets of their hearts and bring them to repentance.

My challenge to you is to expect a “new normal” when we go back to church after the corona virus pandemic. The new people who come will have already been shocked out of their comfort zones by stay at home orders and many other things they have never seen before. It is not our job to make them comfortable in sin. Please don’t blur the lines of what the Bible teaches on blessing and cursing, sin and righteousness, heaven and hell. For believers, the peace of God, with comfort and security, is part of the inheritance of salvation. It comes from God’s love for His children. For unbelievers, the love of God is a drawing to forsake sin and repent. Calling on the Lord with strong crying and tears is always the right response. The *fruit of the Spirit* (love and others) will merge with the *gifts of the Spirit* (prophecy and others) to give us the Presence of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. Let’s anticipate the greatest move of God this world has ever seen.

1. *Assemblies of God Heritage* volume 39 &40, 2019-20 (Gospel Publishing House: Springfield, MO) 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wikipedia, *Southern Baptist Convention* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bauer, Walter*, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, (Univ of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1958) 370 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)