

PREFACE

Change can be stressful in any department of life. A house move brings upheaval. A change of job calls for new skills, adjustment to a different team. A change of opinion can result in loss of face or friendships. The negative dimensions of change are often those that most capture our attention. Intuitively we get the connection in the old hymn between “change and decay”.¹

At the same time, we all recognise that change is often necessary, and for the better. An achievement, a promotion, a new situation in life can be wonderfully exhilarating. ‘Progress’ has a gloss that ‘change’ lacks. ‘Reformation’ also suggests change with a shine on it.

Whether we welcome or resist it, we all know that change is inevitable. Negotiating it is a life skill. In facing up to change, lessons are learned that we might otherwise miss. Obstacles are overcome. Progress is made.

Our subject here is navigating change in the local church. For Christians, local church life is our main way of living out, with others, what it means to be a Christian. A biblical understanding of its significance brings it to the centre of our lives. We invest into it, rightly, with spiritual and emotional intensity.

For this reason alone, change in this sphere can be particularly difficult to handle. Our first response is often at an emotional level. We see ourselves as the victims of change, or as resistance fighters against it. At best, we brand ourselves survivors. Few of us are genuine pioneers, grasping change eagerly. Most are inherently cautious. We often expect change in the local church to be more painful and disorientating than exciting and fruitful. Yet we can probably all look back on changes that have taken place in church life, only to admit that they were for the best. Advance in the Kingdom of God is the theme of many of Jesus’ parables. A mustard seed has a disproportionate potential for growth.²

¹ ‘Change and decay in all around I see’: from ‘Abide with me, fast falls the eventide’, Henry Francis Lyte, 1793-1847

² Mark 4.30-32 (all Bible references are from the ESV unless otherwise stated)

My case in these pages is that, while change is by no means positive *per se*, and change for change's sake is definitely suspect, change *for the sake of the gospel* is authentic. Are there ways of discerning what change needs to take place in the local church for the gospel's sake? Are there ways of managing it well, navigating it skilfully?

Resistance to change is, after all, in some ways a strange phenomenon among Christians. The gospel is *about* change. Regeneration, repentance and faith in Christ, produces profound, personal change. Jesus spoke of it in these terms:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit. (John 12:24)

When a person forgives, and is reconciled to another, for example, something has changed. When the apostle Peter exhorts believers to 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ', he is clearly expecting *us* to change.³ Such personal advance in the Christian life is costly, but worth it. After all, the ultimate Christian hope is that 'we shall be changed.'⁴ There will be a new heaven and a new earth. Our natural resistance to this sanctifying kind of change is part of our fallen human nature.

We might think it sensible for Christians instinctively to be suspicious of changes that occur in the world around us. This also needs proper discrimination. While it is prudent to be cautious, it is also wise to be ready to adapt. We must learn to speak into such change, and to use it, otherwise we slip into irrelevance, get stuck in a time warp, enclose ourselves in a ghetto. When Christians find themselves preaching only to the converted, it is a disaster.

Some developments in the outside world actually prove advantageous to the spread of the gospel. Think of the invention of the printing press just in time for the Protestant Reformation. Parallels can be made with the current digital revolution, providing new, far-reaching conduits

³ 2 Pet. 3:18

⁴ 1 Cor.15:51,52

for the gospel message to a global audience. Changes in technology and their social consequences are by no means all bad.

Likewise, not all change in church life is harmful. Just as change in nature can be a sign of life, so also it can be in grace. When individual believers grow in likeness to Jesus, such growth will change *them*. If all the believers in a local church are thus being transformed from one degree of glory to another⁵, the church itself will be changing - in the love of its members for one another, in practical care for the weak and vulnerable, in compassion for the lost. Visible change will be occurring at street level.

The first thing to grasp, then, is that some change, like the process of ageing, is inevitable. Social, political and environmental conditions are in constant flux. Technological developments occur at breakneck speed. Events such as the coronavirus pandemic only serve to accelerate the pace. Some of the changes spawned are irreversible.

All this is bound to impact the way we 'do' church. Changing conditions necessitate a rethink. Those who try to hold on to doing things the way they have always been done, are historically inaccurate. *They have not always been done that way*. There was a time, for example, when the singing of hymns in English independent churches was an innovation. Was it a good one? Every generation must assess and reassess. The change, as it occurred, had to be managed carefully – as all change must. In some churches they had, for a while, only one hymn right at the end of the service, so that those who disagreed with hymn singing could withdraw.

For forty-five years my wife, Hazel, and I have been members of a church in Coventry. For thirty-five of those years, I have been its pastor, more recently joined by other pastoral colleagues. For reasons that will become apparent, this is a church that over that time has experienced more change than most. It has emerged – is emerging – from a quite distinctive Christian sub-culture. Some readers will instantly recognise the scene. To others, from other church backgrounds, aspects of it will be unfamiliar. Head coverings for women may never have been an issue in your church. Nonetheless, there are likely to be issues in your context

⁵ 2 Cor.3:18

that, in a parallel way, pose significant challenges for navigating change. It may be, for example, that a white middle class undercurrent of criticism about other people's lack of punctuality could helpfully be addressed where you are placed.

The nine chapters of this book are divided into two sections. Chapters one to six take the recent history of our church in Hillfields, Coventry, as a case study. This is not offered as a model, nor are the changes that have occurred presented as recommendations. Rather, my hope is that our story will illustrate the challenges, struggles and mistakes, as well as the minor triumphs, that can occur when gospel-driven change is put in place. The way this is navigated in one church, and the biblical principles applied, may be of significant help to another in a very different context.

Chapter six, in this first section, entitled 'Slices of life', adds human colour to the story, giving glimpses into some of the more quirky aspects of a pastor's life over a long ministry. The gospel always comes to individuals - and individual people are endlessly interesting!

Chapters seven to nine, the second section of the book, then attempt to distil some of the lessons we have learned with reference to biblical principles and practice in the field. Our experience in Coventry, including the jolt of ejection from our denomination, can stimulate thought, prayer and action among other church people and leaders. Like us, you may be struggling with change, but see that it must come if the gospel is to run freely and effectively in an ever-changing culture.⁶ Pastors, elders and church leaders, especially, need a lot of wisdom and grace, not to say grit and courage, to navigate such change. We need to gain the trust of the people we serve. We need to lead by example. We need to focus attention on issues of substance rather than style. We need to achieve both cultural relevance and continuity. We need to take the people with us. Above all, we need the wisdom that comes from above.⁷

⁶ 2 Thess. 3:1

⁷ James 1:5,6

At the same time, congregations facing change need to hold realistic expectations and to be prayerfully supportive of their leaders, neither campaigning constantly for pet ideas nor resisting all change on principle. My aim in the following pages is to help Christians across a variety of church contexts. At the heart of my approach is an essential test for any proposed change: is it, or is it not, for the sake of the gospel?

Before we attend to these things, however, we must lay a foundation to demonstrate the great cultural hospitality of the gospel itself.