

# Change

There are some in our assemblies today that are very vocal in their demands for change. They insist principals and practices governing the local church and our missionary endeavor must be altered to keep pace with the “times”; they are old fashioned and outmoded. But are they? Have they not worked?

The principals and practices followed by our assemblies at home and in foreign outreach are not assembly principals per se but New Testament principals! Are they outmoded?

Look back over the past one and a half centuries. The assemblies have been blessed by God and have been a great influence throughout the world. Many of our number have been prolific writers and have made a significant contribution to the field of evangelical literature. In the realm of missionary endeavor, assembly missionaries have circled the globe and literally turned the world upside down. It can hardly be said assemblies have been ineffective!

Methods should change and, in fact, over the years there have been many changes in the methods and means employed by our local assemblies and missionaries abroad. But the principals prescribed for us in the New Testament we have no license to change. They cannot, they must not be changed!

Any pressure for change should be directed not towards our principals which have withstood the test of time but towards ourselves. As Christians, it is time to change our priorities, it is time to recognize our responsibilities to our local assemblies, it is time to reaffirm our obligation to our Lord to spread the good seed of the Gospel and to declare His glory among the nations.

It is time to guard our autonomy, guard our simplicity, guard our liberty, and guard against pressure for change that would weaken our testimony and dilute our effectiveness and corrupt our principals.

On Echoes' Day at the London Missionary Meetings in October, 1984 Dr. Frederick A. Tatford delivered a very timely address on "Pressure for Change."

Due to the significance of the subject, CMML originally published the text of Dr. Tatford's address in the June, 1985 issue of MISSIONS magazine. The response was so overwhelmingly favorable and requests for additional copies so numerous we have reprinted Dr. Tatford's address in a separate booklet form.

We pray as this article is read and reread the issues might be carefully weighed and that we will "stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught" and there will be a willingness to embrace the changes Dr. Tatford suggests are both logical and imperative.

S. E. Robinson

(Originally published by C.M.M.L., U.S.A. in the Missions magazine 30 years ago & it is still as relevant and valuable for today!)

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## PRESSURE FOR CHANGE

Some three thousand years ago Solomon argued that history was an endless cycle of recurring events and concluded that “there is no new thing under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Or, as Alphonse Karr said in *Les Guêpes* over a century ago, “plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose” — **“the more things change, the more they are the same.”**

But is not this the jaundiced view of the jaded philosopher? Surely Benjamin Disraeli was in closer touch with reality when he declared that “change is inevitable. In a progressive country, change is constant.” And who has not caught the inspiration of Tennyson’s words, “Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change.”

Never has there been a period more affected by change than our twentieth century. The unparalleled scientific and technological developments of the last few decades have completely transformed our manner of life. Yet, at the same time, the decline in religious belief and the influence of humanist and existentialist philosophy have resulted, on the one hand, in a hedonistic and materialistic mode of living for a large number of people and, on the other, in an unprecedented mindlessness and a sense of frustrated purposelessness for the less privileged.

Current and impending changes, ranging in character from the macroscopic to the microscopic, are even greater in their scope and impact than those which have already occurred. In his startling book, *The Eco-Spasm Report*, Alvin Toffler says of today’s conditions, “What we are seeing is the general crises of industrialism — a crisis that transcends the differences between capitalism and communism, a crisis that is simultaneously tearing up our energy base, our value

systems, our family structures, our institutions, our communication modes, our sense of space and time, our epistemology as well as our economy. What is happening, no more no less, is the breakdown of industrial civilization on the planet and the first fragmentary appearance of a wholly new and dramatically different social order.”

In the past the majority of workers in Britain have been employed in commerce and industry and professions related thereto. With the present developments, particularly in computer technology, by the early part of the next century, probably fewer than 20 percent of the population of Britain will be employed. Entire industries like banking and insurance, and a considerable proportion of others such as printing, railways and postal communication will be programmed by computer. In addition, the production by then of electricity by the thermonuclear (or fusion) process may very largely eliminate coalmining, reduce boiler and turbine manufacturing, and revolutionize steel production and related industries.

Change is upon us, affecting every sphere of life, including the religious, and assemblies are not exempt. There are, of course, those whose mental processes ceased to function a long time ago and who are consequently strongly resistant to change, and who may possibly obstruct the work of God by their obscurantism or spiritual obtuseness.

There is an increasing number, however, who demand change because principles and procedures have remained unaltered for an appreciable time. The call for change for the sake of change is not always indicative of the unusually clear perception and wisdom of the *avant-garde*: it is often characteristic of the irrational inanity of the mentally jejune. William Hazlitt well wrote of Shelley, “If a thing was old and established, this was with him a certain proof of its having no solid foundation to rest upon: if it was new, it was good and right. Every paradox was to him a self-evident truth; every

prejudice an undoubted absurdity. The weight of authority, the sanction of ages, the common consent of mankind were vouchers only for ignorance, error and imposture. Whatever shocked the feelings of others conciliated his regard; whatever was light, extravagant and vain was to him a proportionate relief from the dulness and stupidity of established opinion." Although caustic, the words might apply to many today.

**A constant review of methods is patently desirable, but no sensible person will jettison means that have worked well for years, unless he has found a demonstrably more efficient way of carrying out an operation. So also, one does not, without careful thought and prayer, impose changes in spiritual modes or activities which have stood the test of time and of the study of the Scriptures. Some of the changes being introduced into assemblies today, even although sponsored by well-known teachers, may be found, on closer scrutiny, to lack the impress of the Biblical hallmark so essential to their justification.** That will doubtless be termed "reactionary" by some of my many young friends, who so often bestow upon me the inestimable benefit of advice drawn from the wealth of their inexperience.

The task allotted to me, however, is not an examination of the welcome or unwelcome changes occurring in assembly life and procedure. It is rather the call for change in missionary matters, and primarily in those having a relation to the U.K., although similar problems arise in North America and the Antipodes.

In recent years there has been extensive discussion on the subject of foreign missions in most denominations. While there is normally a frank acknowledgement of the need which existed for the evangelization of the heathen in the nineteenth and early twentieth century's, there are frequent references nowadays to what has been rather fatuously termed "the post-missionary era." Indeed, only a couple of decades ago, these views were crystallized by a professor

of missiology at an American university in a book entitled, *Missionary Go Home!*

Even in our own “**undenominational denomination,**” we not infrequently hear the suggestion that the foreign missionary period is finished: so many doors have closed and so many fields have been evangelized that it is no longer appropriate for young people to consider service overseas. It is sometimes urged that our own country is our true mission field and we are reminded that ninety years ago in Britain over 7.25 million people regularly attended church, whereas today fewer than a million do so. It is argued, therefore, that all effort should be concentrated on the homeland. Could anything be more absurd or ill-considered?

**Over 70 percent of the world’s population is non-Christian.**

In the days of our Lord the total population of the world was under 300 million. Today it is 5 billion. The number of committed Christians in that figure is probably 5 percent. It is true that a further 22 percent Roman Catholics and Protestants would describe themselves as Christians. But, on the most favorable basis of reckoning, over 70 percent of the world’s population is non-Christian.

Of course, God has not left Himself without witness. For instance, in China, with a population now of a billion, there were a million professing Christians when the “bamboo curtain” fell in 1949. Today it is estimated that there are 30 million (and during the intervening years there have been no foreign missionaries). But facts of this kind do not relieve us of our responsibility. Our Lord’s commission still holds.

The suggestion that it is time for a change of emphasis and that effort should now be concentrated principally on the homeland and not diffused unnecessarily over a mission field which has allegedly already been covered, is presumably one of the reasons for the general lack of interest in missionary affairs. Such a suggestion, even when made by responsible leaders, shows a deplorable ignorance of world conditions -- and in a day when information is more readily available in print and through the general media than ever before. The clamant cry of heathendom is as loud as ever it has been. And the assembly elders who neglect to train and send forth their most capable young people to the foreign mission field will one day face a serious charge at the judgment seat of Christ. Our commission is to evangelize the world and not merely our own small cul-de-sac.

It has been claimed by some that the concept of a full-time missionary, who spends his life preaching and teaching in one particular field, is now out of date and totally irrelevant to modern conditions. It is urged instead the short sharp bursts of active witness by large teams of young people are far more effective in reaching the unconverted. Organizations such as Literature Crusades, Gospel Literature Outreach, and Operation Mobilization have done sterling work of this character, and it has been of immense value to the spiritual life of the young people engaged in it. Furthermore, a number of members of the teams have become aware of the real challenge of the mission field and have given themselves wholly to the Lord's work.

But this kind of effort by part-time witnesses can never replace the work of those servants of God, who steadily plod on, day in and day out, for perhaps fifty or sixty years. The influx of a large team to flood a town or village with gospel literature may seem extremely impressive but, if few or no members of the team can speak the local language in order to converse with the people, the ultimate effect may be minimal. Moreover, one of the major tasks of the missionary is to establish local churches by making disciples and, despite the

inspiration of a team visit, it can obviously make little contribution to this end.

**There is increasing pressure for a fundamental change in assembly missionary principles and procedures.** It has frequently been pointed out, as a matter to be deplored, that the brethren have no central missionary organization, no overall plan of operation, no detailed design for workers' guidance, no direction or control, no adequate financial scheme, no superannuation fund for retired missionaries, etc. It is the antithesis of the picture presented by the average missionary society. One consequence has been that not a few elders have seriously advised young people to apply to certain missionary societies, which seem to be well organized and able to allocate workers to selected mission stations and to guarantee the material support of such workers. Superficially, all this may appear an admirable arrangement, but perhaps a little further consideration is desirable.

From the inception of the brethren movement, local assemblies have maintained an autonomous position, claiming to be responsible to God alone and not even to each other. The concept of a central governing body, to control the operations of the local churches in any way, to formulate their basis of belief or doctrinal creed, to decide the general policy of the "movement" (in relation to missionary or any other matters), to determine the appropriate use of finances, or indeed to attempt to exercise any form of authority over the assemblies has always been anathematized. When conferences of assembly elders are held, it is consistently made clear that the conference has no authority over local assemblies and no responsibility for their course of action and that the conference is unable to arrive at any decisions binding upon local assemblies. The attitude so scrupulously taken seems in complete accord with New Testament ecclesiology. In these circumstances, it would be difficult to contemplate — or justify the establishment of a brethren missionary society with powers of direction and control, policy



decision, fund-raising, and responsibility for recruitment, publicity, missionary welfare and superannuation. Nothing comparable to this is envisaged in the New Testament, nor would it be consistent with the direct responsibility of assemblies and workers to God Himself. It is true that a medium exists in Bath and also in other centers in the U.K. and other countries for the transmission of funds and for the provision of information regarding missionary activities, but it is inconceivable that these centers should exercise any supervision or direction of missionaries. It is naturally helpful if they are able to make available to missionaries information on practical matters, technical, legal and theological questions, and even answers to personal difficulties, but they can only advise and not direct.

These centers can (and do) facilitate communication with local authorities and central governments; they provide financial and other guarantees which are sometimes required by the “powers that be” (and which a home assembly would be unable to supply); they may assist at times in solving passport and visa problems, and in helping in traveling and transport arrangements.

These services are, of course, rendered on behalf of assemblies, individual believers and missionaries. Critics have argued that those assuming this responsibility are virtually representatives of the assemblies and should, therefore, be appointed by the assemblies and be retired at an appropriate age. But the impossibility of hundreds of autonomous communities finding a way of making an agreed appointment should be evident to the most moronic. We ought to be thankful that there is a small band of men, willing to make personal sacrifices for this work, and to accept this arduous and thankless task on our behalf.

The apostle Paul, the outstanding missionary statesman, obviously had an overall plan in mind for the evangelization of the world. He saw clearly the importance of certain cities to the

implementation of the plan, and then of key provinces, and eventually of the center of the empire.

By contrast, as already implied, it is said that assembly missionary work is completely unplanned. Missionaries apparently choose their own fields of service and decide upon their own methods — but they claim to do so under Divine guidance. They may spend a whole lifetime preaching to a few hundred people in a number of small villages, instead of commencing a witness to thousands of key people in strategic cities and centers. Fields for which they might be eminently suited or in which help is sorely needed, may consequently be neglected to the apparent detriment of the whole area. But the Book of Acts does not envisage the direction of the workers, either by a local assembly or by some central body. Rather does it depict them as being commended by the local assembly to the grace of God and being set free to act as the Holy Spirit guides them.

**Once it is acknowledged that the work is the Lord's and that it is His will that must prevail, schemes to assist Him in achieving His purposes become superfluous and irrelevant.**

The church at Antioch was sensitive to the will of the Holy Spirit in setting apart Barnabas and Paul. They fasted and prayed with the Lord's servants and indicated their fellowship with them by laying their hands on them (Acts 13). Subsequently, they exercised no supervision or control whatsoever over the missionaries. They gave them no instructions and in no way sought to guide them. The pressure being exerted today to make missionaries subject to the expressed views of their home assemblies, finds no support in Scripture. The missionaries went where God led them. Sometimes they received practical help from churches and individuals; at other

times they supported themselves by secular work. They declared that, just as a shepherd has a right to a share of the milk produced by the flock for which he cares, so “the Lord ordained that they who preach the gospel should live of the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:14). In other words, they were entitled to financial support. Nevertheless, they preached the gospel without charge (1 Corinthians 9:18). In his letter to the well-beloved Gaius, the apostle John maintained that the missionaries who had gone forth in Christ’s name, taking nothing of the Gentiles, were deserving of material support (III John 5-8). But none of the New Testament writers apparently assumed that the missionaries should rely upon the home churches to assess and meet their financial needs.

It has been represented that the basis adopted by assembly missionaries, following the New Testament pattern, is no longer appropriate in modern circumstances and only adds unnecessarily to the stress and strain under which they labor. It is argued that it would be far better if they were completely relieved of the financial stress that is incurred by what is commonly termed “the life of faith.” Many a missionary has had experiences of being reduced almost to the last penny and of being compelled to wait upon God for the supply of his needs. Sometimes a financial gift has been received at the precise moment when the rent was due or a railway fare had to be paid. Food has been left on the doorstep when the larder was empty and prayer was being made for the provision of the next meal. A new pair of boots has become available quite unexpectedly in the heart of the jungle just when the missionary’s footwear had finally given out. Countless stories have been told of such experiences. Yet it is asked whether it would not be preferable for the missionary to be relieved of all the anxiety and worry entailed by financial needs. But would it be equally preferable for him to be relieved also of the joy which comes (not only to him but to the donor also) from proving that a Father God is faithful and is still concerned for His children’s needs?

The argument, although prompted by sympathy and kindheartedness, runs counter to the New Testament teaching of the relationship of the Master and His servants — a relationship that nothing should be allowed to sever. Once it is acknowledged that the work is the Lord's and that it is His will that must prevail, schemes to assist Him in achieving His purposes become superfluous and irrelevant. Who can tell the value He places upon the training and shaping of His servants?

**Too many warm-hearted believers at home respond all too readily to well-phrased appeals and advertisements to help the suffering church. Their very generosity may well become a mortgage upon a busy missionary's time and energy. This is a pressure which ought not to be imposed.**

Partly due no doubt to the excellent publicity of relief and welfare organizations, there has developed a tendency in recent years for funds and effort to be diverted from the spiritual to the secular. In some fields, educational and medical work are patently still essential; in some, the teaching of simple trades or home crafts or the training in elementary agricultural methods may be desirable; in yet others, the relief of poverty and distress may be vital. None of these things, however, should supersede the primary object of all missionary effort — to win souls for Christ and to plant New Testament churches. In some missionary societies, sentimentality has displaced spirituality, and large sums are being expended and valuable effort employed in improving local conditions, without attracting a single soul to Christ. Too many warm-hearted believers at home respond all too readily to well-phrased appeals and advertisements to help the suffering church. Their very generosity may well become a mortgage upon a busy missionary's time and energy. This is a pressure which ought not to be imposed.

Emil Brunner was undoubtedly right when he declared, "It is not the pressing task of the church to create, to change, to improve the social order. The task of the church lies beyond any social order, because the task is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God which transcends all social order, good and bad alike."

Whilst there has been a recognition that, in some instances, a contribution to the improvement of conditions creates a more favorable atmosphere for the preaching of the gospel, there has developed an increasing pressure for the secularization of the gospel, particularly in South America and other Third World countries. Many theologians contend that there is a need for a theology which enters into the experiences of the oppressed peoples of those countries and which, in complete solidarity with the afflicted and exploited masses, provides a way of freedom from current conditions and the possibility of a new society.

Liberation Theology, as it is usually termed, claims to represent the world of poverty and of those socially, politically, economically and culturally depressed, and it poses one of the greatest challenges to the church today. It is virtually an ideology of struggle, and its tendency is to turn to the social sciences, rather than to Biblical teaching, for the tools required to improve conditions. A gentle and hardly perceptible pressure is being exerted, to induce even assembly missionaries to incline towards this subtle secularization of the message.

The danger is clear, D. G. Bloesch aptly expressed it in his *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, when he affirmed, "Conversion is seen as involving a decisive break, not with man's inherent drive for power, but with the conditions that hold people in economic and political bondage. The new birth signifies our initiation into the revolutionary struggle for a new world. What is disturbing about this

point of view is that it locates the misery of man in oppressive conditions in society, rather than in the concupiscence within the heart of man, and sees a revolution by violence as a way of salvation." This is the crux of the matter.

Salvation becomes a political liberation, embracing the whole of man and human society, and leading to the building of a just and peaceful society. **The claim that the gospel has a socio-political function, in that it must stress injustice and exploitation as being incompatible with it, is not a New Testament concept.** It is all too easy, however, for sympathy with one's fellowmen to affect attitude and preaching, and we should be aware of this pressure upon assembly missionaries.

The trends and influences experienced by the home church are no less in evidence on the mission field. At home, the fallacy of the specious arguments for the closer relationship of churches and denominations is apparent. On the mission field, where Christian fellowship is appreciated so much more, the dangers attending unreserved cooperation with other bodies are not always as readily recognized. And the proposition that duplication of effort in certain fields should be eliminated, as wasteful and unnecessary competition, may seem reasonable. The pressure for fuller association than in the past, even at the sacrifice of "minor" principles, has sometimes affected even well-established workers. It is a change to be strenuously resisted.

The corruption of the gospel and the tendency towards ecumenism are not the only pressures on the mission field, however. It is being urged upon some workers that there should be a change of attitude in relation to pneumatology and the exercise of spiritual gifts. It should be appreciated that isolation and the lack of Christian fellowship almost inevitably lead to introspection and often to a sense of failure and a desire for a higher spiritual experience. In such circumstances, the forceful presentation of the modern charismatic

teaching has proved well nigh irresistible, and more than a few missionaries have succumbed to the appeal to enjoy a fuller and more powerful spiritual life. Unless there is a clear refutation of this teaching the persistent and increasing pressure, which is being brought to bear, may affect the whole character and distinctive witness in some fields overseas.

It has been maintained in some quarters that fuller attention should be paid by missionaries to the culture and civilization of the races to whom they go. Without a greater understanding, it is argued, they are unaware of religious parallels and their significance, and injudiciously condemn representations of the attributes of the Supreme Deity, or initiation ceremonies in which there may be reflections of the truth. They enforce practices (e.g., the covering of nudity or the abolition of polygamy), which are entirely contradictory of the national culture. The picture painted is not entirely justified, but it furnishes the critic (who usually has little personal understanding of the true situation) with the means of belittling the methods of the Lord's servants.

Many of the changes which are being forcefully pressed today are based on fallacious and illogical reasoning — and sometimes on sheer ignorance. But there are changes that seem both logical and imperative.

In the first instance, **it is time that assembly elders ceased to evade their responsibilities to the assembly and to the Lord's work.** Many are totally unaware of world conditions or of the special needs of different spheres of service overseas. How can they bring such needs before the assembly if they devote no time to acquainting themselves with the facts? How can they advise young people where their talents, abilities, and spiritual gifts can be best employed in the world field? How can they train young people for the Lord's work if they do not know what is needed? This is the work of God and their stewardship should be that of faithful servants.

**We must face the fact that the time is short...The world is heading for a crisis unparalleled in history.**

Secondly, **instead of decrying present workers and their mode of working, young people should be encouraged to study the spiritual needs of the foreign field and the most suitable ways of equipping themselves to meet the needs.** There seems to be an absurd notion prevalent in some quarters that God suddenly tells a man to go to the Philippines or Iceland and equips him overnight for the task. In more than one case, a man has claimed to have received a call because he did not like his secular job or was unemployed. The mission field is not a place for malcontents or washouts. It needs the best.

Thirdly, **it is time that we realized that missionaries are human and subject to the same pressures, emotions and reactions as we are.** The temptations of Africa or India are as great as those of Soho or Piccadilly and, in some cases, are of the same character. Capable Bible teachers should be encouraged and, if necessary, aided financially, to visit the mission field and to minister to the missionaries and to discuss their problems with them. This is an imperative today, to which we pay little or no attention. Yet we are surprised if a missionary falls or returns to secular work.

Fourthly, **there should be a reconsideration of the high standard of living which so many of us have adopted, and a fresh realization of the meaning of sacrificial giving in the light of Calvary.** In parallel with this, there should be a more intelligent appreciation of the living costs in other countries and of the pecuniary sacrifices we are imposing on our brothers and sisters who are laboring overseas.



Finally, we **must** face the fact that the time is short. Whatever one's eschatological views, it is obvious that things cannot go on much longer as they are at present. The world is heading for a crisis unparalleled in history. The time for armchair criticism, sloth and lethargy is past. **It is time to rise up and, with the same élan and enthusiasm as those who have gone before, to lift high the torch to flame into the gloom. Millions are in darkness and we have the light. Let us re-inspire our coworkers in other lands and back them with our prayers and material support.**

These are the changes required today if assembly missionary work is going to survive. The need for their application is urgent.

- F.A. Tatford

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