

THE CHURCH IN TRANSITION

I. THE CHURCH IN TRANSITION:

The church is in transition. The Lord Jesus Christ is preparing His Body and in this preparation there are great changes taking place. Any time there is change people will react to it; some react too much and some too little. Balance is difficult to keep outside of the wisdom of God and walking in the Spirit and in the Word. Our ability to deal with change properly will be a determining factor in how we are able to receive what the Lord is doing among us today.

Too often we speculate about the church and what God is doing and many times don't form conclusions from a solid Biblical basis.

For example, consider the traditional church service; we have the call-to-worship, three hymns, an offering, special music, many times a disconnected sermon, an invitation, and we depart on schedule just as in any other business meeting or social gathering. Then we think that those in the world do not care about the truth or are just plain carnal because they don't want to come to our meetings!

Consider the more Pentecostal or non-denominational style meetings. Everyone is greeted in a fellowship time, followed by 30 to 60 minutes of contemporary music, starting with fast songs and ending with slow heart-searching songs. Typically a message, which many times is a motivational speech, possibly an invitation to the altar or an invitation to coffee and fellowship after the service.

If we are not careful both styles of meetings can be based more on bondage to the familiar, speculation or simple sentimentality than on an encounter with God. We do many things for these reasons. We sing certain songs because of sentimental memories associated with them. We hang on to certain traditions and rituals because that's the way they were doing it when we were saved, that's what happened when we were filled with the Holy Spirit, or that's the way our mother or grandmother did it.

Some hang on to the past because it's comfortable or because they are "emotionally tied" to it. Some however completely throw out the past and are always seeking the "new thing" with God when in reality are seeking what will inspire the emotions for the moment.

II. NO ONE LIKES DISCOMFORT:

Many times we are kicked out of our nest of comfort—and our first inclination will be to blame it on the Devil because we have been taught that "God always works in peace, and we're certainly not at peace now!"

I can remember the first time I was in a church where people raised their hands and I thought, "Why do they have to do that?" And then they clapped. I didn't say it out loud,

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but inside I was begging, "Don't clap! You're putting our Lord Jesus Christ in the same category as entertainers and superstars!"

I was fighting against this change because it was uncomfortable for me. I didn't know that the Bible says to...

Psalms 47:1 ESV To the choirmaster. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah. Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy!

So the fact that I was uncomfortable had nothing to do with spirituality, or Biblical truth, it was just uncomfortable. If we are not discerning discomfort becomes the enemy and we might find ourselves testing true spirituality by whether or not it is comfortable. To top it off, we mistake discomfort for discernment of the Spirit. We might as well say, "I knew it wasn't of God because I couldn't sleep during it."

We can accuse people of being unspiritual for not coming to most of our churches, but the fact is that many of us we wouldn't show up either if it were not for our religion. I have asked many preachers, "If you didn't get paid, would you go to church every Sunday?" In a candid moment, when I promised I wouldn't tell anyone their names, many said "no." Yet many in the church fuss at the world because they won't come to hear the church's outdated language, irrelevant programs, and uninteresting discussions.

III. THE NEED TO BE NEEDED:

We all battle within us to some level with the "need to be needed". It was God who said, it is not good for man to be alone. It was God who placed in us the desire to fellowship and draw from one another.

The enemy and our fallen nature messed it up and we end up using one another to satisfy a need within us. I spoke with a lady who admitted that both she and her husband had serious doctrinal and relational issues with the church they were attending. I knew the situation and was personally surprised that they remained in the church. I asked her one day why she and her husband stayed knowing the different doctrines and other issues. She responded that she had a teaching position in the church she enjoyed and her husband was on the church board, which he enjoyed. She said that for the most part they just stuck their heads in the sand like an ostrich and ignored what was being said and done. This included the Pastors sermons and teachings. How sad that this is their testimony of church existence.

At times we have looked at the church with some objectivity and realized that people were not responding positively, but we allowed our culture, not the Holy Spirit, to teach us how to reach them. In many ways we've become just another institution with a market mentality. We looked at the businesses of the world and the shopping center

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mentality and we decided to try the same thing. It is not necessarily wrong to learn something from sources outside of the church. However, we have often been too quick to adopt whatever works for the world. As a result many churches have adopted a capitalistic, market mentality, and that philosophy is basically "the customer is always right." Now if the customer is always right, then you've got to give the customer what the customer wants, on terms that he will accept.

The December 17, 1990 edition of Newsweek Magazine contained a lead article entitled "And the Children Shall Lead Them: Young Americans Return to God." This article looks in depth at the growing trend of churches trying to please their "customers" (no longer called "believers"). This article discussed how commitment to a doctrine or truth was no longer considered important, but the "success" of a church was now determined by how good the programs are. It described how today's churchgoers inspected congregations like they did restaurants—if one did not fit their needs or tastes they would just go to the next one. They no longer "convert," they shop for their churches! One pastor remarked: "The No. 1 rule of church growth is that a church will never get bigger than its parking lot." This new movement, called the Christian Growth Movement (CGM), markets a businesslike marketing approach to church development.

I'm not trying to be critical of churches that are trying to grow, but what is the real purpose of growth? The article went on to quote one pastor as saying that the concept of individual sin is kind of "lost", because **"people want support, not salvation, and help rather than holiness."** We know this to be the truth because over half of the books sold in Christian Bookstores today are self-help books.

IV. DOING THE WRONG THING FOR THE RIGHT REASON IS STILL WRONG:

There can be something very right about wanting to meet the needs of people instead of sitting back in our comfortable forms and traditions and playing church. However, there is something terribly wrong with letting the people "dictate" the terms of their salvation.

It is never right to do the wrong thing for the right reason. Our Lord Jesus Christ did not do it, the Apostles did not do it, and neither has any true leader of the Biblical or historic church. There is a religious inclination in man that causes him to seek water to quench his spiritual thirst, and to find bread to feed his life starved soul. However, man will inevitably try to buy what he thinks he needs on his own terms and as cheaply as possible.

Marketplace success is declared when the product is quickly consumed by the masses. So how do we know when a church is successful? Some would say..."When consumers buy the product?" Others would say that a church is successful, "When they fill the buildings and people attend their many programs.

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We read about these extreme forms of distorted priorities, but to what degree has this marketplace mentality affected us all? When someone travels to other Countries such as Africa, India and the Philippines, we will see the American market enterprise at work in extreme.

As a discerning historian once wrote concerning the gospel:

"What began as a spiritual movement in Jerusalem became...

Nothing more than a philosophy in Greece

Nothing more than an institution in Rome

Nothing more than a culture in Europe and

Nothing more than an enterprise in America"

The church was never meant to be a business dictated by the will and desires of man. The church was mean to be a place of communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and with one another on the terms established in the Word given by God.

V. JOHN THE BAPTIST: A TRANSITIONAL MAN:

John the Baptist is one of the greatest illustrations of a transitional man. His ministry is a transitional ministry: a transition from the Old Testament law to the New Testament of Jesus and the fullness of mercy and truth. John represents the old but he embraces the new, so his ministry can be a pattern. There is plenty which we can learn from him about how God operates when times are changing.

God does not yield to the mega-church, or the market, capitalistic mentality. He does not yield to the philosophy, the institution or the culture. God did not poll all the people of Israel to ask them what they needed. In fact, if He had asked them they would have said that they needed a strong military leader to free them from Rome. What they got was a Lamb who could free them from Rome and every other yoke. Our Lord Jesus Christ starts freeing us from the inside out. Yet they wanted to be freed from the outside in.

It seems strange to us that God did not showcase John, his great preacher, in a metropolis. He sent John the Baptist, the first one to bring the direct Word of God for over 400 years, to start his ministry in the Jordan wilderness of all places. Today, in our church planting strategies we would call John's preaching place "bad location."

John did not have very good style either. Camel-hair clothes and a shabby leather girdle were not the height of fashion even then. Nobody told John that you're supposed to wear dark suits, red ties, and dress for power. Neither did his diet of locust and wild honey meet much approval. John was a perfect example of bad public relations and poor growth strategy. The only thing John had going for him was the anointing of God's Holy Spirit!

VI. IS GOD IGNORANT ON HOW TO GROW A CHURCH?

John's message was the coming of a new order with a new creature called "THE CHURCH." New orders cannot follow the old trends; they set new ones. John's beginning in the Jordan was one of God's ways of sifting out those who just wanted to be in on the movement from those who were moved by the message. The people had to go out to John; John did not come in to them. ***If you have the anointing and the message for the times, you will not have to promote yourself.*** I think it's interesting today how many little "John the Baptist" ministries God is starting out there. Small rural towns are now becoming beachheads for the work of God.

I introduced a new motto here at First Baptist Church Apalachicola. ***WE WIN OUR CITIES ONE HOUSE AT A TIME.*** We fully believe that God desires to win a small town or a major city "one house at a time". Therefore, we should not operate on the capitalistic market mentality of giving the people whatever it is they'll buy. John the Baptist preached a message of life. It was a hard message, but it had life-giving power. It's the message of a new order.

The transitional messages will have the quality that sifts out the pretenders of the faith while imparting the hope that change is coming to the true professors of the faith. John was saying that things were not like they used to be; he proclaimed a new kingdom that required both a change of mind and change of values. The changing of one's mind would ultimately change our lives. He emphasized that you do not add the kingdom of God to anything else. "When you get into this movement," he said, "you're going to trade all your jewels for one "pearl of great value." Yet today we see church's bringing messages that are "spiritually/politically correct" so as not to offend anyone in the service, even the lost.

The key to John the Baptist's message is the key to every transitional message, the Bible says that **"the word of God came to John."** A lot of people try to preach a hard message like John the Baptist, but nobody comes to them. It's not only inappropriate to let the people tell you what they think they need, it's also inappropriate for the messenger to assume he knows what the people need. ***We don't need any more sermons, we need messages that come from the Father.*** I asked the question **"IS GOD IGNORANT ON HOW TO GROW A CHURCH?"** Now for the next question.

VII. WERE THE EARLY PREACHERS IGNORANT ABOUT THE RIGHT MESSAGE TO PREACH?

There is a lot preaching that is man's opinion of what's wrong, and it focuses on sin and changing the externals or the "behavior" of a man. In other words it trying to get people more moral, at least to our standard of morality.

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However, when John the Baptist came on the scene he started talking about a kingdom that changes the internals or the “heart and mind” of a man. It was an internal message of eternal life. His message was not about the morality of man but a message concerning the righteousness of God. Multitudes started going to him even out in the middle of the wilderness. The religious leaders came, the poor came, the sinners and tax gatherers came, and the soldiers came. Every sect of society came to hear the message of John. What did John say that drew such crowds of followers?

According to the highest standards of good Public Relations he declared—“You bunch of snakes! What are you doing out here? Who told you to flee the wrath to come?” In essence, John was saying that we can't just add the gospel to our little collection of gods. He preached repentance. The people had to change their minds and show true change.

The multitudes begged him to tell them how they could apply this message to their individual lives. We must preach life in order to get people to respond to us like that. John gave them specific examples. Every man who had two tunics should share with him who had none. If you had food and another didn't, give to him. John was saying that when you know the truth, people will be the main issue instead of things.

Tax-gatherers asked, “What does it mean to us?” John said, “Here's what it means to you. Be honest.” Isn't it wonderful that God's life is so direct and so simple? John the Baptist didn't have to write out a fifteen-page sermon or publish a book on ethics to tell them what it meant.

The soldiers came next. John told them not to take money by force, not to accuse anyone falsely, and to be content with their wages. In other words, don't abuse your position. Notice what John didn't say. He didn't say that commerce was wrong. He didn't promote communism or socialism. He didn't speak out against militarism. He talked about internals (issues of the heart). This is the directness of God, the simplicity of God, the life of God.

VIII. THE TRANSITIONAL MESSAGE: IT HAS NOT CHANGED

John the Baptist came into all the districts around Jordan preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. That was the key to his message, and that is what God knew the masses needed. God did not poll the people in a congregational vote to hear them complain about needing a place to get together and have their own little church. God did not want to hear them state that they wanted a Christian community where everything was under one roof, and that they needed a support group for various deficiencies and affirmation for their self-esteem. Instead, God said that He knows what we needed: We all need to repent and be forgiven.

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When we are really forgiven, (truly walking in God's forgiveness), we are freed from the guilt and condemnation that has crippled us, and we are liberated to forgive others. Then we won't have to get together for the affirmation of others. We will want to get together because we love others and want to serve them. The thing that really keeps us in bondage is either not receiving forgiveness or not giving it. That is, quite simply, what John came preaching and teaching to the people.

Notice John's attitude in all of this. He said, "Jesus must increase and I must decrease."

Unfortunately, when things are going well and we have a message of life that people are responding to, the tendency is to become an end unto ourselves. The transitional church, if it becomes an end in itself, will become a part of that which has passed by. Now, more than any other time in history, we are to decrease as our Lord Jesus Christ increases. In the days to come, you are going to see the temptation to be drawn to what the "worldwide" church is doing. The worldwide church seems to be overly focused on prophecy, healings, and miracles. I am not denying these gifts, but they should be a natural outflow from a life walking in Spirit and Truth.

His Spirit is poured out on all the sons and the daughters. Miracles are going to happen and the tendency is going to be "Look at us!" We cannot let that happen. When He increases, we must decrease.

IX. ENDING OUR LIVES WITH AS MUCH JOY AS WHEN IT STARTED:

To maintain the status of a church in transition we must be willing to be nonessential. After all the work John the Baptist did in preparing the way he ended up getting his head cut off. His ministry was not a long-lived ministry because it was a transitional ministry.

He was persecuted because he stood for the truth in a world of deceit. His message contradicted the mentality of the day. John kept magnifying Jesus instead of making a name for himself. Individually or as a ministry, we may not get our head cut off, but we must be willing to be dispensable. If we are not willing to live with a dispensable mentality, when the greater ministry comes, we will end up competing with it, and ultimately persecuting it.

If God says one morning, "Okay thanks guy, you did a good job but now your job is over," we must have as much fun closing the ministry down as we did building it. Otherwise, we will become self-preservationists motivated by territorial rights, which are controlled by territorial spirits.

Now let's look at the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Luke 4, Jesus is baptized, goes out into the wilderness, is tempted by the Devil, and then comes back from his temptation. In Luke 4:14 (KJV) says,

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Lk.4:14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit and the fame of Him spread throughout the surrounding districts.

The Greek word translated "fame" is "pheme". It means "rumor."

The rumor about Him spread throughout all the surrounding districts. Do you know that when God starts doing new things in your churches, or in your own life, rumors start? People will have speculations about what is happening.

The second occurrence is in Luke 4:37. The King James version uses the word "fame" again. It says...

Lk.4:37 And the fame of Him was getting out into every locality and surrounding district.

This is after our Lord Jesus Christ had begun to heal and cast out demons. The word for "fame" has changed here; it is the Greek word "echoes". This same word is used in other places to talk about the "roar" of the wind and sea.

WHAT USED TO BE A RUMOR IS NOW A ROAR.

The transitional church starts out as being a RUMOR of what God is doing among them and ends with a ROAR of what God is doing.

X. FROM A RUMOR TO A ROAR, AND FROM A ROAR TO THE WORD:

We said that the word "fame" in Lk.4:14 is "pheme" and means **RUMOR**.

The rumor about Him spread throughout all the surrounding districts. Do you know that when God starts doing new things in your churches, or in your own life, rumors start? People will have speculations about what is happening.

We said that the word "fame" was also used in Lk.4:37. The Greek word is "echoes" and means **ROAR**.

This was used after our Lord Jesus Christ had begun to heal and cast out demons. The word for "fame" has changed. **What used to be a rumor is now a roar.**

It will get rough as we go through transition. There will come a time when the rumors become so loud you can hardly hear what God is saying, and sometimes you won't. Even your friends may turn against you.

The third time this word "fame" is used in relation to the Lord's ministry is in Luke 5:15,

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Lk.5:15 The fame of Him was spreading even further and great multitudes were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses.

The Greek word here translated "fame" is neither "pheme" for RUMOR, nor "echoes" for ROAR, but "**Logos**", the word of God.

The truth finally gets out. Why do we go through the first two stages? It purifies us. It gets the false motives out and determines if we are truly going to be a part of what God is doing, or if we just wanted to be doing what everyone else was doing.

If we are to make the transition into the new move of God we will be tested on this point. The rumor and the roar will get so loud that if you can be talked out of it you will be talked out of it. However, if you will keep going there will come a time when the "Logos" will prevail. Scripture says that the people began to come from everywhere because they wanted to be healed of their sicknesses.

That which started as a **RUMOR became a ROAR.**
That which was a **ROAR became a reality of the WORD OF TRUTH.**

It will get rough as you go through the transition from doctrine, which has been corrupted by manmade religion, to seeing actual truth from God's Word. We will be transitioning from a form of godliness to a holy, broken, fasted lifestyle, and from seeking the things of God to seeking the heart of God. There will come a time when the rumors against you become so loud you can hardly hear what God is saying, and sometimes you won't. Even those whom you have called your friends for years may turn against you.

We said that the first word for "fame" in Lk.4:14 is "pheme" and means **RUMOR.**
We said that the second word for "fame" in Lk.4:37. "echoes" and means **ROAR.**
We said that the third word for "fame" in Lk.5:15 is "Logos" and means **THE WORD OF GOD.**

XI. THE NEED TO HAVE AND REVEAL GOD'S LIFE IN AND THROUGH US:

The people saw life in our Lord Jesus Christ and they wanted it. Of course, there are hazards and testing even here. People love life, but they are not always ready to receive it. When we speak about life we are speaking about ZOE, the life like God has life, which is abundant kingdom God-life.

John 10:10 ESV The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

When life begins to flow people are drawn to it, until that life starts to contradict their tradition. At this point, they realize that if they go any further they must deny their

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traditions and receive criticism. At that point many return to the old ways. It is like the natural flow of water.

Water has two distinctive traits:

- It seeks it's OWN LEVEL of lowest point.
- It seeks the PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE.

Many times the Christian life is likened to the traits of water.

Since we are called to walk through transition, let's consider these observations. The institutional church is locked into many traditions. This is not meant as a negative statement; it is just a fact. God can overcome our traditions, but it takes nothing less than God to do it.

Do you know that many churches or people within the church are set up as consumers only? This means that in every service they come in only to take away from the body. It is perfectly right to come in with a need and expect that need to be met by the grace and power of our Lord. However, if someone continues to come to take from the body without any regard to the rest of the body, there is a problem. Any part of the body that only consumes for itself without regard for the rest of the body is a cancer.

XII. TRANSITIONAL PEOPLE HAVE THEIR IDENTITY IN CHRIST:

"Give me a name!"

One of the negative effects of the market mentality is that men believe that a name will give them an identity. When a child is born out of wedlock, people say, "Give him a name," but what that child really needs is an identity, and not just a name. He needs a relationship.

There are people in the church today who feel disenfranchised because they no longer fit in the Baptist, Episcopalian, Charismatic, Pentecostal, or any other main line denomination. In fact, they don't know what they are so they declare that their only identity is that of being known as "A Christian". Some of these are beginning to cry out "Give me a name."

We had some people come my worldwide ministry, Raising the Standards International Ministries (RSIM), wanting to take on our name. We must say "No. That's not what we offer you. We do not offer you a name, but we will offer you friendship, relationship, and an identity. Would you like to submit to us and have us submit to you? We'll offer you a relationship with us and with our Lord Jesus Christ, but not a name."

If you have the market mentality and poll the people, they will tell you they need a name! They want doctrines and standards that define them and differentiate them from

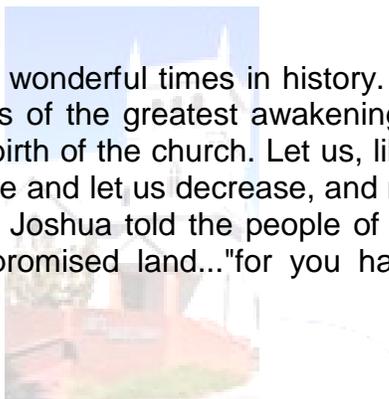
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others. They may not say the word "denomination", but when you give them a name, that name tends to separate them from others who do not have that same title. When an outsider asks why we have one name instead of another, we'll think up some differences in order to give ourselves a reason to exist. That is how denominations get started. Most of them came out of a desire to be secure and to have an identity. This was a greater drive than having doctrinal clarity and correctness.

However dear Christian...you already have an identity that is much greater than any name or denomination can give you. You are a child of the Most High God and you are related by blood to the rest of the children of God. Is this too idealistic? Do we have to start more denominations? Are our grandchildren going to have to destroy again what we're trying to get out of right now? God is offering us an alternative in this transitional time to say that it will work if we will get a word from God like John the Baptist. If we will preach life, simply and directly and if we will give people a relationship and forgiveness, then it will work.

We are living in some of the most wonderful times in history. In the years ahead it will be said that these days were days of the greatest awakening in the church since the reformation and maybe since the birth of the church. Let us, like John the Baptist, keep our eyes on Jesus: let Him increase and let us decrease, and may we have the mindset of transitional change because as Joshua told the people of God as they prepared to cross over the Jordon into the promised land..."for you have not passed this way before", (Josh.3:4).

THE END: *Pastor Charles Morris*



First Baptist Church
Apalachicola