

The Need for Change

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All it takes to make sure nothing changes is to settle for things as they are

The church has never been as numerically strong, or so globally widespread as it is today. Christianity is presently the world's largest religion with 1.6 billion adherents. Yet, as we prepare to enter the third millennium, the church is wrestling within itself to identify both its moral base in a culture that has generally abandoned moral absolutes, and its role in a world that tends to view the religious establishment as irrelevantly archaic. Internally riddled with dissension, its testimony blunted by mediocrity, its voice muted by compromise today's church is in danger of simply meandering across the millennial line, having lost sight of God's original purpose. The crisis is serious, and must be successfully confronted if the church is to be in the next millennium what it was in the first: a light shining in the darkness of the moral maze the hand of God reaching to heal the sick, bless the underclass, lift the downtrodden and give hope and life to the hurting masses.

An Historical Overview

To be sure, this is not the first time the church has faced millennial or generational crisis. From its very inception, from both within and without, the church has had to grapple with ideas and beliefs contrary to the purpose of God's will. The incarnation itself presented a crisis moment for the Jewish nation. All those in the faith of Abraham were faced with decision; and despite the fact that the majority in Judaism rejected Christ, the true line of faith in Israel responded to him as their Messiah. Crisis again erupted in the early church over the issue of circumcision. Teachers from Jerusalem travelled throughout Galatia, contending that it was necessary for the Gentile believers to be circumcised to be truly accepted as the people of God. This provoked the formation of the first church council, assembled to bring resolve to the matter in a way that preserved the unity of the churches - at least for a time.

Successive crises from then until now have resulted in further upheavals, divisions, church councils, and even Reformation. In it all, there have always been people committed to the quest for unity believing that there would be a 'restoration of all things spoken of by the prophets' before Christ would return, and spiritual movements throughout history have quickened this hope afresh. The Moravians, Anabaptists, early Franciscans of Assisi, Christian Disciples, and - at the close of the last century - the Christian Brethren, were all rooted in a restorationist philosophy. Often rejected and persecuted, they nevertheless kept hope alive throughout succeeding generations, determined that Christianity would not be buried in the

shrouds of institutional religion. They strove to fulfil the purpose of God in manifesting the fullness of Christ in the life and works of his church. Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, charismatics and to some extent the discipleship, faith, deliverance, and prophetic movements of our time, have all helped fuel a new spirit of inquiry, a new intercessory passion, a heightened expectation and faith for the 'restoration of all things' to happen - in this generation.

Where We Are Today

The crisis currently facing the church - although similar in some respects to those that have preceded it - is also different to any previously encountered in history. The 1960s, dominated by the quest for a meaningful spiritual experience gave rise to various kinds of religious groups - from those representing the fringes of Christianity to those oriented toward Eastern mystic religions. The Jesus People, The Way, Children of God, Hari Krishna, Divine Light, and Scientology, and the rise of New Ageism - all competing for the minds and souls of people. In addition to the religious search reflected in these cults and groups, today's generation has accepted the paranormal, the psychic, the occult, and the many differing aspects of spiritistic activity in an unprecedented way. All this confronts us with a deepening crisis which we cannot afford to dismiss or ignore.

If people are to see the church as something other than a dinosaur relic in the world of the third millennium, then we the church must be willing to discard all irrelevant religious baggage and strip ourselves of all biblically unsupportable practices in the process. We must become passionately clear and decisive on the moral issues of our time. If we are to be relevant to the need and search of mankind, we must rediscover our true mission in order to capture this present post-industrial generation. We must rediscover and reaffirm our commitment to the integrity of the gospel and the manifestation of the dynamic power of God in ministry.

As God's people we believe he intends something significant to happen in this generation which will restore the message and ministry of Jesus and the Christian communities of 2000 years ago, and take us forward to realities and maturity the early church never saw. This demands a willingness on our part to change. Successive revivals have highlighted the Spirit's call for change, not for the sake of change, but to recover lost ground, to re-align ourselves with divine purpose, and to continue the process of the restoration of all things. *It is not enough for us to try harder and harder to do old things better and better; we have to change.* And it is not sufficient to initiate change just on the periphery of our meetings, methodology, music leadership style etc.; it must occur at the very core of our thinking and practice. Such changes are painful, disruptive, and costly, which is why many people initially resist or resent it.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. - in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* - in a most gripping and heart-wrenching way highlighted the pain of change.

*'I have just received a letter from a white brother in Texas. He writes: "All Christians know that the coloured people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth." Such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively. More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that **the time is always ripe to do right.**'^[1]*

To enter the third millennium sharper, anointed, ready in every respect for its challenges we must seek **actively** to return to those biblical principles that will enable us to be all that God intends us to be.

Christianity is not a system of beliefs; it is men and women filled with the life of God living their lives *his way*, doing *his will* endued with *his Spirit* and demonstrating *his power*, performing *his works* amongst men. For God's covenant communities to fully emerge like this requires a spiritual, moral and intellectual revolution. As *Restorers* we do not find this a daunting prospect; on the contrary, it is the very thing for which we live in active faith. We are entering the third millennium as the extension of the living Christ. The religious world makes a mistake if it thinks it can push what is being said by today's apostles and prophets into a corner and label it 'restorationist' doctrine or churches. *God is not after restorationist churches; he is restoring his church.*

^[1] Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from a Birmingham jail.