

A Congregation Facing Times Of Transition

Aaron Beard
Trussville
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INTRODUCTION:

- A. Whenever we look at facing change in our lives it can be a very scary time!**
1. There are real reasons why we become fearful when we see change on the horizon
 - a. If you're like me, you don't like to be hit with surprises concerning major aspects of your life! You like to know what to expect! It's the fear of the unknown
 - b. This does not mean that the change is bad – We can be facing new territory and it be a good thing; however, it can still be an anxious time in our lives!
 2. There are many aspects of our individual lives where we can see this take place:
 - a. In the “cycle” of life: Marriage, birth of children, death of parents, our own death
 - b. With our jobs: Starting a new job, being fired or laid off, learning a different trade
 - c. When we move or relocate homes – New towns, new schools, and new friends
 - d. Even when one obeys the gospel – Changing lives and associations → What will my friends think? What will my parents think?
- B. Not only do we see times of transition individually, but congregations face changes too!**
1. This congregation had better see some changes because if it is not then it is dead!
→ One of the marks of stagnation is very little to no change!
 2. As in our own lives, times of transition & change can be uneasy times for a congregation!
 - a. How do we respond to times of transition and change within a congregation?
 - b. It's not a typical lesson; yet, it's a lesson I feel is very needed for our congregation today because I believe we are changing – And that's not a bad thing!

I. SOMETIMES CONGREGATIONS EXPERIENCE CHANGES AMONG ITS MEMBERSHIP:

- A. Over the years, because of the process of life, members will see a congregation change!**
1. As Solomon describes, all of us are changing as we grow older! (**Ecc. 12:1ff**)
 - a. **Illustration:** Look at the pictures in the foyer on the wall – You don't look the same as you did 5 years ago much less 10 years ago! You are changing!
 - b. There are some here who used to be very active and even leaders in this congregation who, because of age, no longer are able to do so!
 - c. They, and even younger ones, may look with great fear on the future of the church!
 2. There are some who are not even a part of this local congregation any longer:
 - a. As some get older, there are some in this congregation who have died – We have lost several over the last year and half and there were more before that
 - b. There are others who have been a major part, but have moved to other places
 - c. While physically they aren't here, their influence is a present reality! (**Heb. 13:7**)
 3. So as we see “pillars” in this congregation go on to be with the Lord we can ask ourselves the question, “Whose gonna fill their shoes?” (**I Cor. 11:1**)
 - a. **Illustration:** Juanita being upset over the death of some who she had looked up to for years – I told her, “You need to step up and be that for others!”
 - b. You see, all of these people who have passed on sat where you sat, saw the changes, and were scared as well – They responded by filling their shoes!
 - c. So what now? Will you be that pillar, that strength and source of support, that person who others can look up to? You owe it to those who are younger!
- B. Congregations that are growing will also see new members coming in as they obey the gospel and this change can present some unique challenges!**
1. Just imagine the challenges one might face and the thoughts members might have:
 - a. Some may think, “We used to know everyone well... now I feel like a stranger”
 - b. Others may say, “We were strong and sin wasn't a big problem here, but it is now”
 - c. Still others think, “I don't recognize this congregation any more... what happened?”

2. There was once man who came to join the church in Jerusalem and caused a great disturbance among its members: He was Saul of Tarsus! **(Acts 9:26-28)**
 - a. They did not want to accept him at first because of his history – And maybe they were justified because they knew those he killed and had imprisoned!
 - b. It was a trying time for the church – Could've potentially been a point of division!
3. You can see the struggle continuing as Jews and Gentiles who obeyed the gospel began to work and worship together in a congregation! **(Acts 15; Gal. 2:14)**
 - a. There were certain things that were practiced among the Jewish Christians, but when Gentiles came in who did not observe these conflict arose
 - b. There would have also been Gentiles who came in from idolatry who's past was filled with immorality & unrighteousness who brought their struggles with them
4. If this congregation continues to grow, there will be new members who are weak! Having this change occur is a GOOD problem to have, not a bad one! **(I Cor. 6:9-11)**
 - a. Having weak members in a congregation is not a bad change... the problem is when those who should be strong Christians are still weak or becoming weak
 - b. People bring struggles we might not be used to dealing with & the more mature Christians may have a hard time with the line between patience & comprise
 - c. While we aren't to compromise with sin, we must allow room for growth
5. Our responsibility as stronger Christians is to be there to help those who are weaker!
 - a. We need to treat them with patience as they grow and mature! **(Matthew 12:20)**
 - b. It may be, as Paul, we have to become as weak, using different terms, changing some practices, explaining things we often take for granted **(I Cor. 9:22-23)**
 - c. Yes faces may change, people will bring struggles into the church, and there may be a great amount of weakness – But this is going to be the result of growth!

II. SOMETIMES CONGREGATIONS EXPERIENCE CHANGES AMONG ITS LEADERSHIP:

A. When a preacher leaves & another moves in, it can be an very uneasy time for a church:

1. Sometimes a preacher leaving can be very traumatic for a congregation because they have the problem of being PERSONALITY driven!
 - a. The preacher is the most visible person, he has been depended on to do most of the work, he is the motivating force behind any growth
 - b. Usually when this takes place the preacher is also a very personable person – He is easy to get to know and everyone loves him – They are quickly attached!
 - c. So when this preacher decides its time to move on, many become disheartened and some may even quit coming! The preacher had kept them there!
 - d. May say, "I remember when brother _____ was here, things sure were going good"
2. Congregations need to make sure that its not the preacher who drives them, but rather their love for the Lord and fulfilling God's purpose! **(Eph. 4:11ff)**
 - a. Our commitment should be to spreading the gospel of Christ, to teaching those who are Christians, to helping each other grow, and supplying needs of saints
 - b. If they are driven by carrying out God's purpose, when a preacher they love leaves, it still hurts but they realize there's work to be done and they will press on!
 - c. Their faith & sense of purpose is not in a personality in the church but in Christ!
3. We need to remember that the preacher, while hopefully a likeable fellow, is simply a vessel for teaching the word of God! **(I Cor. 1:10-11; 3:3-7, 21-23)**
 - a. The church at Corinth was plagued by division because people had elevated preachers and were committed to them more than Christ!
 - b. It's not the person who is planting the seed or the person who is watering that seed that really matters – What we are concerned with is the growth that results!
4. When a preacher does determine it is time to leave, he needs to try to leave the congregation in better shape than he found it! **(Acts 20:27, 31-32, 35-38)**
 - a. Some people, whether preachers or not, seem to think that when they leave a congregation that they need to cause as big of a stir as possible!
 - b. They can get their feelings hurt, allow pride to get in the way, & be destructive!

B. Congregations also experience changes in leadership with regards to elders & deacons:

1. We are in the middle of trying to appoint men who fit God's qualifications to serve as elders and deacons in this congregation: **(Titus 1:5)**
 - a. Now it's been 50 years since this congregation has had men serving in these roles
 - b. Some may feel somewhat uneasy about this because it has been so long and they have grown accustomed to not having them in this role
 - c. Others may be fearful because they know elders have made unscriptural decisions in the past or know of elders in other places who have caused problems
2. When we appoint elders and deacons it will certainly be a time of transition!
 - a. We will need to be patient to allow these men time to adjust, be flexible ourselves as they begin to serve, and to be cooperative with their needs and requests!
 - b. Our goal ought to be to allow their time of serving to be a joyous time! **(Heb. 13:17)**
3. The time will come when elders have to step down or new elders are appointed:
 - a. The tendency among some is to immediately start comparing the new with the old
 - b. The new elders may come in and have some different ways of doing things, some new ideas – It may not be wrong... just not how the others did things!

III. THERE ARE OTHER CHANGES WE NEED TO NOTICE:

A. Some changes in congregations are negative and thus should be stood against!

1. Some of the 7 churches in Asia saw changes that took them away from the Lord!
 - a. Some lost their zeal & love for the Lord, others were allowing false doctrine to be taught, and yet others were allowing immorality to go on
 - b. These churches were once alive & growing and standing firm for the truth and righteousness → But, I imagine it was gradual, began to change over time!
 - c. The result of these changes is the same every time **(Rev. 2:5)** → This means that Christ would no longer recognize them as a church of His!
2. It seems like there have been cycles of change every so often congregations go through and that change is a departure from God's word! **(Acts 20:28-30; 1 Tim 4:1-3)**
 - a. At the end of the 19th Century churches who once stood for the truth began allowing instrumental music in worship & sponsoring various societies
 - b. Then during the 50's & 60's there was more departures: Sponsorship of benevolent societies, colleges, church sponsored meals, & recreation
 - c. You can still watch and listen and see congregations wandering from the Lord!
3. So today we must stand firm against any change drawing us away from Christ! **(Jude 3)**
 - a. Usually a departure from the faith comes gradually! Many don't see it coming!
 - b. We must be careful though that when we take a firm stand that it's for the faith and not simply over matters of tradition or our own opinion!

B. There are changes physical in nature, but that affect a congregation's spiritual health:

1. Congregations see physical changes as buildings are expanded or even relocated!
 - a. Memories can make this a difficult time – The building is symbolic for many things!
 - b. Someone might say, "It was here and in this baptistry that I obeyed the gospel!"
 - c. Other may say, "My parents went here, my grandparents went here, this is home"
 - d. The thought of relocating to them would be like abandoning all of those memories and even may seem like we're leaving behind the work of all those people!
2. We see this struggle when the temple was rebuilt **(Ezra 3:10-13)**
 - a. There's two totally different reactions – One group, who knew the glory and grandeur of the original temple, wept while the new generation was rejoicing!
 - b. You can just hear the older generation talking about how things used to be & the younger generation talking about what they will be! Neither group was wrong!
 - c. This often happens when a church decides to relocate or build a new auditorium!
3. When we experiencing physical changes, we must remember they are only physical!
 - a. Sometimes people will show great interest in getting their say in a construction project but never show any interest in the spiritual work a church is doing!
 - b. A building may be full of memories, but let's not allow the unwillingness to change

the physical aspects of a congregation to keep us from growing as we should!

C. Finally there are changes in how a congregation carries out it's work:

1. While standing against unscriptural changes, we must be careful that we are not standing against changes for the wrong reasons: **(I Thess. 5:22 - KJV)**
 - a. This doesn't mean what it looks like – But rather “form” or “every time evil appears”
 - a. Someone says, “That just doesn't sound right!” or “That just seems wrong”
 - b. Others say, “We can't do it that way because that's not how we've always done it!”
 - c. Some might point to others in the religious world and say, “We can't do it like that because that's how they do it!”
2. When are changes in how we carry out our work wrong? **(Col. 3:17; Matthew 7:22-23)**
 - a. They become wrong when we fail to have authority for what we're doing
 - b. They are wrong when we are do them in a way that violates scriptures
3. Now we may look at changing something and determine that it is not best to change it, that it might adversely affect some of the members, or that the old way is better
4. We need to keep our eyes open to the ideas of our religious world – If they are scriptural
➔ They may think of highly effective means of evangelism that we don't think of

Conclusion: Times of change and transition can be very challenging as a congregation!