

The Changeless Gospel¹

Luke Keefer*

The most difficult thing about change is knowing what changes are good, to know how much change is good, and to know which things should not change. When individuals encounter too much change they become mentally ill. When cultures change too much they lose their identity. When churches change too much the faith becomes corrupt.

So, strange as it might seem, the best way to manage change is to have something that does not change. We can think of the human body as an illustration of what I mean. Doctors tell us that thousands of our body cells are dying each day and are replaced by new cells. Yet we remain the same person in spite of all these cell changes. There is a genetic-code (our DNA) within us that gets transferred to each new cell.

Think of the chaos that would result if this were not true. Oriental people might slowly change into Westerners. Men might slowly become women. Or we might all turn into dogs or cats, birds or fish. And think of a student who spent four years in a school and came to the examination in mathematics and found that his new brain cells only remembered contemporary music! But these things do not happen to us, because something within is not changed by all the changes that are occurring in our bodies.

This leads us to ask what is the genetic code of the church? Is there a spiritual DNA which will preserve the church even as it changes its ministry for a world which will be much different a few decades from now?

I think the answer to this question is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We know that Luke wrote two books: a Gospel and the Book of Acts. The Gospel of Luke (and here we could say of Matthew, Mark and John, as well) is the story of salvation which must never change. It is the substance of our faith, the core of our preaching, the measure of truth and life. If we try to change the gospel account, faith becomes sick and the church becomes weak.

The Book of Acts, by way of contrast, shows how this gospel held fast in the midst of a church and a world which changed much. In fact, if the church had not changed the gospel would have lost its power. I want to

* Luke Keefer (M.Div., Asbury; Ph.D., Temple) is Professor of Church History and Theology at ATS.

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emphasize the changeless character of the gospel: what must not change in the 21st or any other century if the church is to have a healthy identity and ministry.

Lessons from Church History: Changes that Compromised the Gospel

The Constantinian Church (4th Century A.D.)

Jesus had told his disciples that life in the church was to be based upon his example of servant leadership. He specifically told his disciples that they were not to build power structures like rulers in gentile governments did (Mark 10:35-45). Yet when Constantine called himself a Christian, the governing patterns of the church became a copy of the Roman Empire.

Over time a religious hierarchy developed with supreme power vested in the bishop of Rome. Clergy became a distinct class of people separate from the laity. They wore different clothing and were allowed into “sacred places” in the church where ordinary Christians were not allowed to go. The gospel suffered because the concept of the “priesthood of all believers” was lost. The church began to teach that ordinary people could not come directly to God through Jesus Christ. They would now need a religious person of power (a priest) to help them connect with God’s salvation.

Worship was vastly changed. It was moved from homes, where it largely was held in the first three centuries, to special buildings designed for church services. The new churches built from the 4th century onward were copied from Roman buildings for civilian government. The “churches” were to be where the entire population could have religion, rather than a company of believers gathering in the informality and the fellowship of a Christian household.

Soon the new churches were made ornate, a place where the wealthy and the powerful could feel comfortable. Trained musicians replaced congregational singing. Clergy entered in a processional, dressed in priestly clothing. The service became highly structured in liturgy and ritual. Gone was the simple service of the fishermen of Galilee. Rome had all but smothered the jubilant faith of the early Christians.

Christianity became joined to the Roman government; the church and the State would cooperate in building a Christian society. Christianity became part of Roman culture. One became a Christian as part of the social heritage rather than by a considerate choice of faith.

Strange as it might seem, the Church tried to adjust the gospel to accommodate all these changes. It did so by ignoring the teaching of Jesus and going to the Old Testament for its authority. There they found a sacred kingship, a sacred priesthood, and a sacred temple with elaborate ritual and ornate worship. This was a model for empire Christianity rather than of a

Savior of sinners who died on a Roman cross at the hands of the Roman military.

In the first three centuries of the church, the gospel demonstrated its power to save in spite of the opposition of the Roman government. But when the Roman government tried to be the friend of the church, the gospel was in greater danger than when the government was the church's enemy.

As the church enters the next century we must remember this lesson. Persecuting governments will be a problem for the church and its ministry. But friendly governments are also a snare for the church, because their influence is so subtle. No government is happy with the Christian confession that "Jesus is Lord," for that means that governments have only limited power, an idea that politicians will hardly accept. If we want to preach the gospel of Christ to all nations, we must be careful that we do not wrap the flag of our country around the Bible.

The Crusading Church (1095-1291 A.D.)

Jesus was the Prince of Peace. He did not kill his enemies to protect his own life. Rather he died to save all people, including the enemies who put him to death.

Jesus taught his disciples to forgive as he forgave, to love as he loved, and to seek peace as He sought peace. Christians were not to hate their personal enemies nor the people outside their race or nation. Christians were never to kill, not even for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

When the Western Church decided to send armies to Palestine to capture Christian holy places from Islamic control, all this teaching and example of Jesus was forgotten. Christian armies killed Muslims and Jews because they did not confess faith in Christ. A Christian sword replaced the gospel in the Western confrontation with Judaism and Islam.

Today the period of the crusades is seen as one of the worst chapters in Christian history. When Jewish and Islamic people remember this history, it is hard for them to believe the gospel of salvation through Jesus.

What happened in the crusades has been repeated in nearly every war that has involved Christian people. It is very difficult for countries that have sent out armies to other lands to later send out Christian missionaries to the same countries. When people carry a gun one time and the Bible the next, it is difficult to believe they are Jesus' people filled with love for the lost.

Think of the case of the United States in this matter. Native American Indians have trouble accepting the gospel preached by North American missionaries. For more than two hundred years, white men took land from the Indians, killed them in large numbers, and greatly mistreated them. Now Indians think of the gospel as the white man's religion, and they don't believe

in it. The same is true of other nations our country has opposed in war: Germany, Japan, Vietnam, Iraq, to name just a few. U.S. missionaries are not having much success in these countries.

South Korea is fortunate in that its military, apart from the Korean War at mid-century, has not been involved in warfare against neighboring countries. I sincerely hope the political problems with North Korea can be solved at the peace table. It will make gospel witness in North Korea so much easier to accomplish.

For we must remember the lessons of the Crusading Church. The ministry of the gospel suffers when we try to carry guns along with our Bibles.

The Enlightenment Church (18th-20th Century A.D.)

In response to rationalization and scientific trends in Europe, especially in the eighteenth century, the Western Church accommodated the gospel to the spirit of the times. It agreed to call large segments of Scripture "myth," and gave up such theological foundations as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the sinful nature of humanity, the atonement of Christ, and the doctrine of hell. It rejected the biblical record of creation and the accounts of miracles throughout the Bible.

In this compromise, Christianity became just one of the historic religions identified with Western culture. The gospel was no longer God's saving truth for all peoples of the earth. Consequently it was believed that missions should be discontinued around the world except for schools, hospitals, and social ministries.

It hardly needs saying that this type of secular humanism has been a problem for the church up to the present. For it represents a dangerous idolatry: humans creating God according to their own image. It results in religion without mystery, worship without feeling, and life without eternity. This is Christianity without Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of humanity.

The Media Church (Late 20th Century)

The media church is hard to describe because it includes everything from very conservative Christianity to quite liberal Christianity. It includes more traditional forms of worship, but it also has a lot of charismatic worship patterns. So the particular danger for the gospel depends upon the theology of the group using the media.

What I am thinking about are the problems presented by contemporary electronic media to the church. Media aim for a large audience, so tend to be overly concerned with what the customers want to hear, rather than what Scripture says we need to proclaim.

Media depend upon maximum effectiveness of very small sound bites.

So there is a tendency to play upon the sensational aspects of Christianity rather than the things of substance. Media tend to develop an audience with unquestioned allegiance to a popular preacher rather than a commitment to a fellowship of believers. In other words, media become substitutes for the church, and discipleship fails to occur since discipleship depends upon intimate relationships and sustained instruction.

There is no question that media will continue to develop in the next century. And the church should use media. But the church must be careful that the media approach does not wrap the gospel into too small a package. We must declare all the truth of the gospel. And media must be supplemented by many other ministries of the church if the gospel is to be heard in all its fullness.

Luke-Acts: The Enduring Gospel

Luke's Gospel tells the full story of Jesus from his miraculous birth to his resurrection, ascension, and the promise of Pentecost. In chapters 1-4, Jesus and his mission is introduced. The birth narratives, his baptism by John the Baptist, his genealogy, his temptation in the wilderness, and his message at his hometown of Nazareth are all used to show that Jesus was the promised Messiah of Israel, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies about salvation. But he comes as more than the Jews were expecting, for he is none other than God in human flesh.

In chapters 5-21, Luke tells of Jesus' ministry on earth. He recounts Jesus' teaching, his miracles, and his efforts to prepare his disciples for the building of his Church. It is the largest section of the book and covers a wide range of topics, but at the heart of the stories is his mission to save sinners (especially chapter 15).

Then chapters 22-24 cover his crucifixion and his resurrection. These incidents are not only the climax to the story of his life, they are also the foundation stones of the church: the gospel message focuses upon Jesus crucified and resurrected, the Savior to all who put their trust in him.

If we want to avoid the mistakes the church has made in the past, then we must cover all the topics of the twenty-four chapters of Luke. We dare not reduce the gospel to just those stories that we like or just those doctrines that are easy to understand in a particular culture. Just as Bible translators translate the whole Bible, so must the church's ministers preach and teach the entire gospel.

Luke's treatise, called the Acts of the Apostles, details the beginning of the church in Jerusalem and its expansion as far as Rome. The church in Acts changed its practices to fit the culture of the people where the church was being planted. But the church did not change its message when it took the gospel to new places. The outline of the sermons recorded in Acts is very

similar to the points established in Luke's gospel.

C.H. Dodd carefully studied the early sermons in Acts and summarized their main points. They can be summarized as follows:

- a. The age of fulfillment has arrived in which the Old Testament prophecies about Christ are being realized.
- b. This has taken place through the ministry of Christ's life and death.
- c. By virtue of his resurrection, Jesus has been exalted at the right hand of God, the Messianic head of a new Israel.
- d. The Holy Spirit is a sign of Christ's present power and glory.
- e. The Messianic Age will shortly be completed with the return of Christ.
- f. Therefore, people should repent of their sin and receive the promise of salvation for the present and the age to come.²

We see then that the church's message after Jesus and in places outside of Jerusalem remained the same. Time and place did not affect the content of the gospel.

We hear much today about "preaching in the language of the people" who make up our audience. And, from the standpoint of good communication, that is a valid point. However, there is a right way and a wrong way to "preach in the language of the people." The right way is basically the art of translation. Not only must we translate the gospel into the language of a particular ethnic group, we must also translate the language of our preaching into the linguistic sub-groups within a culture (for example, youth, scholars, workers, etc.). But our focus in translating is to find words that faithfully convey the meaning of the gospel story. In the right way, the original story remains unchanged. Only the words change.

The wrong way to "preach in the language of the people" changes both the story and the words. Then we are not merely translating the gospel; we are guilty of changing the gospel so that it says something different. We can use fancy terms for these changes, like "cultural sensitivity," "indigenization," or "contemporary hermeneutics," but the fact remains that we are not preaching the same gospel as we find in Luke and Acts.

The church in Acts translated the gospel into several new languages, but it kept the gospel story as it was given by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. In other words, the church engaged in translation but not in reinterpretation. They succeeded in preaching the gospel in the language of the people. That, in part,

²C.H. Dodd, The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1936) 21-24.

is the larger concept of speaking in tongues in the Book of Acts. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit they convincingly related the gospel which had transformed their lives into new languages for people in the Mediterranean world who did not speak "Hebrew."

Application to Ministry in the Twenty-First Century

There are many voices in the contemporary world (outside the church and sadly inside the church, too) that advise the church to change its message. Some do so because they are impatient with traditional Christianity. Again, some want the church to downplay salvation and the age to come and think primarily about political, economic, and social conditions of the present time. Others want us to give up the claim that Jesus is the only way to salvation. In the name of globalization, they want us to put Jesus on equal status with Buddha, Confucius, and Mohammed, all teachers of different religions.

I have tried in this lecture to show several reasons why we should not change the gospel we teach.

The early church did not change the gospel when it went to different places. Rather, the gospel kept the church true to its identity as it went into many different cultures.

Various examples from church history show what happened when the church did change its message. In every case, the church became sick and its ministries became weak. We know too well the danger of changing the gospel.

A church that dares to be faithful to the gospel has two great benefits. First, Jesus will reward those people when he returns to rule and reign. And, second, the church that holds to the gospel will have a powerful ministry. In Acts, the authorities, both religious and political, wanted the apostles to stop preaching in Jesus' name. But they said, "We must obey God, rather than men" (Acts 5:29). They prayed for boldness in their witness and preached Jesus in spite of persecution. And the early church grew not only in numbers, but in commitment, worship, and devotion as well. We often say we admire the early church and long to be like them in power and devotion. But to be like them we must take our stance with them on the truth of the gospel.

In eighteenth century England, John Wesley found that many people opposed his gospel ministry. The Enlightenment Church of his day felt the gospel story was out of date. They urged Wesley to be more rational in his religion. But Wesley took his stand on the truth of the gospel as recorded in the Bible. And he and his helpers had such success that they saved the nation from sinking into a loss of the Christian faith. Methodism changed the nation through the preaching of the gospel. If Wesley had listened to his critics, we would never have heard of him in history. It was the gospel that made Wesley

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able to stand in a world that was quickly changing.

We live and minister in a world that is changing quickly and much. But God has given the church a genetic code, a particular DNA, which gives us an identity in a world that is losing its face, and a mission in a world that is losing its way. That genetic code is the gospel, which has endured from the first to the twenty-first century. It is a gospel that has endured the journey from Jerusalem to Seoul, and transforms believers into Christians in recently evangelized countries as it did in Palestine. And God only knows where the path of the gospel goes as it stretches out from the younger churches to the unreached people in our world. But we do know that wherever Korean Christians proclaim the gospel, people will come to know the God who redeems and transforms sinners into the image of Jesus Christ.