Leading Through Change:
Without Splitting the Church

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1. Introduction: The Challenge of Change

Change—It Really Is Hard
There are some words in church that are just inflammatory. Uttering the word “change” is the church equivalent of yelling shark at the beach. One of the reasons may be that many times, change places us squarely between “a rock and a hard place.” We know the change is necessary so we can’t back away from it, but we also know it’s going to be really hard for some people, and that a lot of difficult conversations probably lie ahead.

Poorly handled change is at the root of a huge proportion of church conflicts and splits. Pastors talk about this as an area of real challenge. A season of major change is a dangerous time to lead poorly. Yet, most pastors freely acknowledge having had no real training in this area. And hence, many will confess that they have indeed lead badly in these difficult times.

Change really is hard. Even the godliest people naturally attach to beloved traditions and customs, and find it painful to say goodbye to them. We hate to lose those things where find our identity, like the worship style or the 10 am service. We fear the uncertainty of the unknown. We wonder whether and where we will fit in the ‘new order.’ Hence it’s natural, and not necessarily sinful, to want things to stay just as they are. God has wired us to find comfort and security in the familiar.

That said, as fallen creatures, there’s often also a darker side to the story. Sometimes those desires to protect our old ways escalate into idols of the heart. Our desire to protect the status quo becomes a demand. We want things to stay a certain way, and we’re willing to sin to get what we want. As our desire trumps God’s glory, we dig in for a bare-knuckles fight. If at the same time the proponents of the change have likewise idolized their “new way,” then the lines of battle are truly drawn. At best, it’s ugly, and at worst it can split the church right down the middle. It's little wonder that change can send the most seasoned leaders running for cover.

Do we really need this change?
Evaluating your own heart
Given these difficulties it is critically important at the outset for the leader to determine whether a proposed change is really necessary. The critical question here is “is this change truly God’s idea, or is it mine?” This is a difficult question to evaluate and there are two ways to consider it. One way is to carefully consider whether this change represents an idol in the leader’s heart.

As fallen creatures we all suffer from idolatrous cravings. Our hearts are ‘idol factories’ and leaders are not immune to this tendency. We may have our own craving for a ‘rocking’ modern worship service, a Christian school, a state-of-the-art building, or an orphanage in Manila. While none of these things are necessarily wrong of themselves, they may not be God’s plan for our church in the current season. Great ideas become idols when we want them so much that we are willing to pursue them against God’s wishes and to the hurt of his people.

Church history is littered with stories of pastors who have pursued a personal dream or vision. They press ahead with ears closed to wise and godly counsel. Ultimately they split, damaged or even destroyed their church in the process. I Corinthians 10:31 calls us to do all things for the glory of God. This means that change also must be for theology of God, not for the glory, reputation or status of any leader or leadership team.
Much prayer, careful self-examination and the pursuit of godly counsel are critical to determining the underlying heart issue, and the possible presence of an idol. Here are some great questions to work through with your leadership team that may be instructive in this discussion:

**Idol revealing questions**
- How would you respond to disappointment or barriers related to this change?
- If you could force someone to do one thing, what would it be?
- Is there something you don’t even want to pray about because “God might say no?” An idolatrous heart says, “My will be done.” A heart of right worship says, “Thy will be done, Lord.”
- What am I willing to sin to get? Or sin if I’m denied?

**The wisdom of counting the cost: The Stained Glass “Bearded Jesus”**
Another important way to evaluate whether the change is God’s idea is to consider whether the cost of the change may exceed its value. As military history constantly reminds us, some hills truly aren’t worth dying on. Some changes truly aren’t worth the carnage they create in their wake, where what we lose is inevitably greater than what we gain. Would God ever instigate a change that all but ruins a church, destroying its relationships and witness?

These are the changes that God is probably not calling us to. A few years ago a dear pastor friend of mine, ill-advisedly (by his own free admission) replaced a beardless Jesus with a bearded Jesus in a stained glass window. He did this without seeking the congregation’s permission—even though the congregation had paid for this window through some real sacrificial giving years before his arrival.

Not surprisingly, the result was a palace revolt. The eventual resolution of this story is pretty convoluted. The beardless Jesus was destroyed when it was removed. The one they ultimately re-made had an unfortunate sun tan. But, resolved it was! More important was Pastor Charlie’s chief learning from this affair. In his words: “why did I go there? I know there are some difficult changes I really need to make in this church, but getting a bearded Jesus wasn’t one of them.” As Jesus himself taught, a wise man counts the cost before entering the battle or beginning to build the building.

Of course, that doesn’t mean we should back off all change, or back down when we encounter resistance, and especially sinful resistance. Part of leadership is understanding that sometimes pain is a necessary thing. Sometimes the shepherd is called by God to drive the sheep against their comfort or preference. This is the lesson of Moses. Knowing when to press on is a critical leadership question. The cost/benefit question is a very important one for the leader to ponder.

In light of these swirling currents, if we’ve decided that a change really is necessary, that God is calling us to this despite a potentially rocky road ahead, how is the Christian leader to think about managing church change?

**Guidance for the Christian Leader**

**The Danger of Secular Thinking—Avoiding the Pit of Pragmatism**
Perhaps the first thing to say about managing change is that tempting though it may be, the full embrace of secular change management principles (often drawn from the commercial world) is potentially disastrous. Change is a huge topic in the secular world. You will find about 14,000 titles in Amazon.com on managing change. If you look further, there are innumerable articles and seminars. It isn’t just a passing hot topic. It’s a big, permanent feature of the corporate landscape. Wherever you look change is:
- understood to be hard
- leaders need to manage it with skill
- and there is no shortage of secular resources to guide the corporate executive.

So, surely we can find all our answers in the corporate models and maxims? This is a profoundly important question: **Can a Christian leader in fact apply worldly concepts of managing change in a church setting and be successful?**

The Answer: Handle with extreme care.
Some general secular principles may be very helpful, built on sound and wise principles and proven from experience. As leaders, we should **by all means**, communicate well, build consensus, involve people and ‘celebrate quick wins.’ This is all good stuff from every change book you care to grab, but at the same time we must recognize that much worldly thinking on change is based on a dangerously unbiblical foundational assumption—Pragmatism. This is the pervasive idea that “if it works it must be right.”

This pragmatic view manifests itself in one especially dangerous area for the Christian leader. There is the idea that pushing the change through trumps all other priorities. Pragmatic thinking says as long as you accomplish the desired change, within some limits, collateral damage is completely acceptable. This is because the key person to be satisfied is the stockholder and their needs are paramount.

This area of secular thinking is devastatingly incomplete for the Christian leader. This viewpoint has little to say about preserving, let alone strengthening, relationships as you go through change. It has nothing whatsoever to say about what’s going on in the hearts of those affected by change and how those hearts need to be lovingly shepherded. This thought, absent in secular thinking, is arguably the most important issue for the Christian leader.

As Paul says “admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all” (1 Thessalonians 5:14). Biblical guidance of this sort sounds completely ludicrous and foreign to corporate ears. In corporate America, whether written or unwritten, maxims rule the day, like “shoot the wounded,” “get with the program or get off the bus,” and “the ends justify the means.” Why is this important? Because “shoot the wounded” is the philosophy of the world from which much popular writing on change emanates. The Christian leader does well to remember it is not biblical.

The authoritarian ‘my way or the highway’ may sometimes be the right answer in the corporate world (really? What an interesting question that is). It’s never the right answer in the church. It cannot be the mantra of the shepherd whose calling is to lay down his life for the sheep.

**Scripture simply doesn’t give us license to invert God’s order and, in times of change, ask the sheep to suddenly lay down their lives for the shepherd.** In fact, far from it. Here we also do well to remember that Jesus in John 10:1-14 and Ezekiel in Ezekiel 34:1-6 both reserved some of their most stinging words for shepherds that failed to care for their flocks in times of difficulty.

It’s true that however well handled, some sheep may be lost in a transition. As Christians we are not called to be pragmatists, simply to get it done and accept the damage. We cannot welcome the loss of a few troublesome sheep. We’re called to something higher, to leadership that glorifies God and to change that preserves relationships.

**The Corporate Contamination of Christian literature**

Sadly, a worrying fact is that when you search for material specifically on church change, hoping to find something different, what you typically find is just a clunky re-work of the same worldly principles. The secular “results over relationships” approach is surprisingly evident in Christian writing. Perhaps this in keeping with a general admiration of “all things corporate” that the church has so unwisely embraced.

Many Christian leadership books, while strong in other areas, are thus contaminated. For example when discussing how to deal with those who oppose change, they will openly recommend tactical “battle” plans. These are ways to size up the opposition, evaluate their strengths, find their weaknesses and marginalize and crush their leaders. All this for the sake of the holy outcome! Hmmm—not only is this an ungodly and unbiblical approach (see Philippians 2:3-4), it’s also a recipe for catastrophic failure of change efforts when viewed from a relational standpoint. Does this advice train shepherds or breed wolves?

As with so many areas, such as growth, leadership and marketing, we see that secular thinking is dangerous for the church, and even more so when presented as a Christian view. While the intentions of these writers are surely good and honorable, we must guard most carefully against deifying the corporate view of life.
Given the size of this problem, there’s surprisingly little solidly biblical guidance in the Christian world. You find a bare handful of resources on Amazon. When you Google “church change,” you mostly get articles on conflict. This tells you little about change, but a great deal about where change typically leads.

**The Need for a Biblical View**

In order to accomplish the change God wants, in a way that glorifies Him, and inclusive of maintaining healthy and loving relationships, we need an alternative to the world’s view. We need a theology of change. Rather than shoehorn in a worldly framework, we need a biblical framework.

Now and not surprisingly, we don’t find a chapter in Ephesians on managing change. In the same way that we don’t find a direct passage on teenagers or midlife, we absolutely can absolutely infer God’s heart and God’s principles in this area.

As you think about God’s view of change, what clear principles do we find in Scripture that bear on this issue. What does that mean for how we lead change? I summarize this ‘theology of change’ in ten points below, each with some high level thoughts on application.

This is an important framework for leaders’ thinking. Teaching and reinforcing these concepts to the flock may be a wise early step as you prepare a congregation for upcoming change.

**A Biblical View of Change**

**Personal Change**

God clearly prescribes personal change. Consider the very active verbs, “Be transformed” (Romans 12:1) and “Put off this, put on that.” Scripture makes it clear that the Christian is to expect and pursue change in their personal life. We aren’t converted into the image of Christ, we’re sanctified into the image of Christ and it takes a lifetime of change.

**Application:** It’s helpful for people to be reminded of this. The Christian life isn’t static. This is an important concept as Christians co-operate with God in their own sanctification. It also begins to break up the ground of resistance to other changes.

**Community Change**

God clearly prescribes change in the community of His people. Throughout the Old Testament, God notably does not locate his people on one place and setting and leave it at that. In Genesis 12, Abraham is told to pack up his things—he’s moving. To the children of Israel, God brings seasons of battle, seasons of peace, seasons with kings, seasons with judges, seasons with prophets. God’s people aren’t static. Psalm 23 describes an active leading through changing landscapes and seasons. God leads his flock—corporately—to new pastures, to still waters and through shadowy valleys. Perhaps clearest of all is Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, a beautiful and poetic exposition of the different seasons we are to expect to see: “For everything there is a season. A time to keep and a time to cast away.”

**Application:** people must expect change in the life of their church. It’s simply inevitable. Nothing continues unchanged. Carpets and sound systems need replacing. We change worship styles. We outgrow our buildings and we hire new pastors. We can’t escape change. We need to think through how we’re going to lead and follow through it.

**Preferences**

God ordained a diverse church and we will differ in preferences. In I Corinthians 12 it says we are one body but with many different parts. As changes come, of course we will disagree on our preferred worship style, or the amount to spend on the sound system and the design of the new building. This isn’t a problem—it’s healthy! While my sinful nature may say otherwise, the church actually wouldn’t be a better place if everyone was just like me.
**Application:** We should celebrate the diversity and varied talents that we have in the body as gifts from God to His church. We should expect diversity to bring different viewpoints, and probably tension in times of change. Let’s understand and allow for that diversity. It’s a gift. Don’t try to conform everyone, and don’t expect 100% agreement.

**Resisting Change Appropriately**
People can appropriately resist change because God wired us to value familiarity. Traditions are good because they provide structure and order and predictability to our world. God prescribed many traditions for his people and interestingly a ‘rhythm’ of festivals and celebrations. We rightly experience sadness, fear, anxiety, uncertainty when a part of our order changes. Have you ever moved away from a cherished town and home? Seen a beloved child move out? We’re wired to attach to order and it’s hard when that order changes. This isn’t sinful resistance to change. We’re wired to love the familiar.

While it’s not as example of God-glorifying behavior, in Exodus, the Israelites found the desert a pretty scary place. So, they wanted to go back to the comfortable familiarity of the “garlic and cucumbers” of their Egyptian slavery. That seems crazy to us as we read in comfort, but that shows how much we value the ‘known’ and fear the ‘unknown’. It also shows how a failure to trust God places us more dependent on our old familiar ways.

**Application:** this isn’t a sin or discipline issue, unless accompanied by a total failure to trust God as in the case of the Israelites. In its more mild form, it’s more likely a pastoral issue. We need to help people work through the pain of transition, the fear of loss, the uncertainty of the unknown. Change really is hard. We return to 1 Thessalonians 5:14, “admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.”

**Resisting Change Inappropriately**
People can inappropriately resist change: We’re idolaters and we idolize practices and traditions. James 4:1 says our hearts are idol factories. We idolize many things, including the ways we do things. We idolize to the point that we may sinfully resist when they’re threatened. That same sin makes us more interested in ‘winning’ than obeying, following or submitting. And, of course, change proponents can idolize the ‘new’ way in just the same fashion. Dueling idols sets up some treacherous battle lines.

**Application:** as discussed in the context of the leader (see above), getting to the heart issue is critical. In the spirit of Galatians 6:1 (restoring a brother in sin, in a spirit of gentleness), the leader must help his flock see what is going on in their heart. Then the leader must gently and firmly help people to repent of the idols that drive them sinfully for or against a particular change.

**Prescriptive Areas**
There are very few areas of church practice where God is prescriptive. Scripture is very clear on core doctrine, somewhat prescriptive on some areas of practice, such as baptizing or celebrating the Lord’s Supper. Scripture is not specifically prescriptive on a huge range of issues about which we make decisions. God does not give us the final word on curriculums and carpets, song choice and sound systems, grape juice or wine.

**Application:** We are given considerable freedom by the Lord on many aspects of the ‘practice’ of church life. That puts most practice decisions in the realm of wisdom issues, and should be dealt with as such. People must not be prescriptive where God is not. If God hasn’t said “It has to be this way” we certainly can’t say that to each other. By implication, a logical extension of this is that we all need to open to the possibility of change where God has not been prescriptive.

**Wisdom**
Not all change is necessary and/or wise. Leaders must weigh the value and the cost. As discussed above, in addition to evaluating their own heart, leaders need to balance where a change is really needed, and where
the ensuing carnage is really not worth it. That’s **not** to say that we back off from a needed change because the road looks too tough or in the face of sinful resistance. But it is saying that we balance the value of the change with the cost of the change. The “Bearded Jesus” probably wasn’t God’s idea and the value (none!) clearly didn’t exceed the cost (lots!). Jesus tells us to count the cost, and Proverbs advises us not to grab a dog by the ears.

**Application:** Be as certain as you can that the change is God’s will, not an idol in your heart. Be able to show how the change will glorify Him and strengthen his church. Change should be for a good reason and serve a specific purpose. Pursuing a difficult change that serves little meaningful purpose is an exercise in madness. It’s impossible to understate the value of prayer and wise counsel in these times.

**Leading Gently**

God clearly calls his leaders to lead gently, wisely, firmly and ultimately lovingly. The biblical model is the Shepherd who loves and lays down his life for the sheep. Our leadership is to be modeled after the Great Shepherd himself. It is self-evident that when we lead through seasons of change, we are not somehow excluded from this mandate—far from it. Leading through change is probably the most important moment where these characteristics **must** be most evident.

**Application:** Leaders have a huge responsibility to lead well and effectively in this difficult season. Even when the change is clearly the right thing, that doesn’t mean it can be handled poorly and insensitively. Be especially careful about excessive aggression toward your enemies, a clear indicator of “corporate creep.” As our leadership slippery slope indicates, the aggressive side of the slope can **really** show up in managing change. If you railroad folk in order to get the change through, people won’t think they’ve been heard—because they actually won’t have been heard! On the other side, it is possible to be too passive. The leader who fails to move when a change is clearly needed leaves people with a sense of aimlessness and frustration.

**Respecting Leaders**

God clearly calls His people to respectfully follow their leaders. Even when decisions are not completely popular with everyone—and what decisions are—God calls people to honor and respect leaders. God has placed the leaders over them as a gift (Hebrews 13:17) “with joy and not groaning.” Therefore, while concerns may be genuine, gossip, slander or undermining are sinful, unbiblical and inappropriate patterns of behavior.

**Application:** as changes are pursued, the people involved need to maintain an appropriate biblical perspective on the authority and responsibility of their leaders to lead them, even when it’s uncomfortable. Asking questions, seeking to understand reasons, and airing concerns, all these are healthy responses and to be encouraged. Sinful responses, such as gossip, slander, and political maneuvering, aren’t ever appropriate for the believer. The flock does well to be reminded that sometimes leadership is really hard, especially with a diverse group of sheep, some of which bite.

**The Gospel**

The Gospel enables all change. The gospel is the root and key to **all** change for believers. It’s in the Gospel that I die to myself and my preferences. I lay aside my rights because of the rights Jesus laid aside. The better I understand the Gospel, the easier change becomes. In Matthew 18, with the parable of the unmerciful servant, Jesus clearly teaches that the one who has been forgiven much **should** be willing and able to lay down his rights to what he wants or is entitled to.

**Application:** point people to the Gospel. The general key to peacemaking is found here. When I really understand how God forgives me, I can forgive and work with others in an understanding way (Ephesians 4.32).

Here is the Gospel applied: If God laid down his right to punish me for my sin, maybe I really can lay down my preference for the Sunday School curriculum.
Theology into Practice — the “Top Ten” of Managing Change

If we take the biblical principles of change outlined above, and combine them with the best of the good biblical material that does exist, here are ten practical rules on pursuing church change wisely and biblically. You will see some overlap with the theology above and some application and extension of it.

Prepare
Prepare your own heart. Pray it through. In particular, weigh the value and cost equation. Some changes are so important they must be pressed through, others simply create pain for no real value. Don’t back away from needed change, but don’t needlessly “grab a dog by the ears.” Prepare your heart for the inevitable stresses of the road ahead. In particular, examine your own heart. Is this change truly God’s idea or is it yours. And it goes without saying, soaking the change in prayer throughout the process is everyone’s job, not just the leaders.

Counsel
Don’t go it alone. Get counsel. God provides leadership teams and advises us to seek the counsel of others. Use your advisors wisely, especially as you weigh whether and how to proceed (Proverbs 15:22).

Prepare
Prepare your people. Most Christians will not have studied the theological dimensions of change. Before the specifics of the change immerse everyone, help them to prepare their hearts. Give them a biblical view of change. Help them to discern “natural” and “sinful” resistance, teach the importance of the Gospel in managing disagreement and model shepherd leadership. Regarding the change itself, focus on the problem you’re trying to solve. Getting people to see the need is critical to building initial momentum.

Plan
Carefully construct a plan. Specifically, have a process, explain the process and follow the process. Have we thought through what resources are going to be needed, such as people and finances. Do we have them? How will this change fit in with other aspects of church life. Do we really want to debut our new worship style at the Christmas service?

Communicate
Communicate, communicate, communicate. Because fear and uncertainty are such significant parts of why change is hard, communication is a huge antidote. Key things to communicate:

- Reasons for the change. What problem are we solving? Making people really aware of the pain we’re trying to make go away creates a good common ground.
- How change will glorify God, strengthen the church and reveal the gospel?
- How the change is consistent with the mission and values of the church?
- How the process will work?
- Carefully and clearly affirm how, where and when people voices will be heard.
- Share that preserving and strengthening relationships will always be a key priority. "No sheep left behind."
- Be honest where you don’t have all the answers

How we communicate is critical. The “PAUSE” principle is the second part of this teaching:

- Prepare—pray, get the facts, seek godly counsel, develop options
- Affirm relationships—show genuine concern and respect for others
- Understand interests—identify others' concerns, desires, needs, limitations, or fears
- Search for creative solutions—prayerful brainstorming
- Evaluate options objectively and reasonably—evaluate, don't argue

Opposition
Understand the “heart” of opposition. Is it a legitimate love of the past? Then lovingly and compassionately encourage people to move into a new season. Is it sinful idolatry? Then gently admonish (Galatians 6:1) and call to repentance with Scripture as your guide.

**Coalition**
Build a coalition. Do this initially with the leadership team. This is critical. Without a unified leadership nothing else will follow. When this is established, then build beyond the core leadership team. Groups follow their leaders. People need to be heard and to have a place where their questions can be answered. Spend time with those in the church who will be able to communicate your passion, reasoning and plans to others. This is an extended application of Scripture’s clear teaching on delegation and teamwork. Be careful not to confuse "coalition" with faction. We are not trying to build a cell of support as a base from which to assault our opposition—otherwise we are back to the corporate approach.

**Flexibility**
Be flexible. Accommodate and modify based on the input of others. There is often much room to accommodate the wisdom and wishes of others, without compromising the vision and plans that have been developed. Can the worship style be changed after Easter? Probably. Grace rules here, as does the principle of Philippians 2:4. Looking out for the interests of others trumps "winning."

**Timing**
Speed is over-rated. Often the difference between change that breaks relationships and change that preserves relationships is the speed of the train. Let people process new facts. Give them time to come up with their questions. Don’t let the enthusiasts drive the bus too fast. As one denomination teaches, “change is a journey not a race.” Be aware of other things going on in church life that will affect this change.

**Momentum**
Maintain momentum. Set against moving too fast. Don’t allow one issue to bog the whole thing down until all forward movement is lost. My church recently merged with another church, which, while within the same denomination, was surprisingly different in character, age profile and worship style. All the big issues and most of the small were resolved before the merger. Some of the less important “quicksand” issues were intentionally left until after the merger. Interestingly, our new unity and post-merger excitement are making these much easier to work through.

**Glorify God**
Be grounded in God’s glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). Always be asking the question, “What most glorifies God in this situation?” When you feel victorious, attacked, discouraged, beaten down: all these moments tempt us to a sinful response. Let’s pursue the God-glorifying response.

**In Conclusion**
Change will always be hard as we say goodbye to dearly held, cherished practices and traditions. It doesn’t have to be destructive—far from it. Well managed change can usher in new seasons of church life with enthusiasm, excitement and joy, and most importantly, with strengthened relationships which bring glory to God.

For this vision to be a reality, the Christian leader doesn’t need to turn to the commercial world’s ideas for how to bring about change. In fact, to do so is to court disaster. The leader needs to turn to God’s guidance for sound biblical leadership, and apply that wisdom with prayer, care and sensitivity.