

EMBRACING CHANGE
Mountain View Alliance Church, Kitimat

Acts 8:1-5
May 15, 2011

I want to speak to you this morning about the inevitability of change and how to respond to it. To begin, I want to refer you to a Scripture text that illustrates how God can use change for good. (Read Acts 8:1-4.)

We'll look at some other texts along this line as well, but note here the radical nature of the change that took place, the unsettledness which it must have caused, and the ultimate effect. The church of the time certainly was not looking for the kind of change that Stephen's death brought about. It must have been very stressful and disheartening. But God used this disruptive experience to bring about something very good. Through the persecution of those times, Christians were scattered and the Word of the Lord was preached to a wider audience.

And I can't help but think there is a message in all of this for the church here in Kitimat. Only God knows why the mill closed down and put many people out of work which also affected the ministry of this church. Maybe God knew the church needed a change. Maybe God wanted to make the Word of the Lord known in some other places as well – like Hinton, for example.

Over the past several months we have been processing the change that has taken place here. And far more than I can imagine this has not been an easy experience. But now it's time to recognize the reality of it all and to think how God might want to use it for good. *There is a time for everything, says the writer of Ecclesiastes, and a season for every activity under heaven... a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them...*

All of this reminds me of some of the things we have gone through in our lives and in our family. As we were beginning our married lives and our pastoral work, we always imagined that things would go well. After all, we were serving the Lord and He has promised to bless us. Well, in the end, despite our efforts and faith, it didn't always go quite like we had imagined. Amidst the heartache of a number of disappointments we were forced to take a closer look at what we believe and how we apply it to our own lives. And through the process I think we grew in experiencing a deeper appreciation for what love is all about and what it means to trust the Lord and to seek after Him more deeply.

Last weekend we shared some important family time as we celebrated the recent marriage of our oldest daughter. I think Carolyn and I especially could see that God is doing something deeper through the changes that have occurred – many of which are beyond anything we would have planned.

I don't have to tell you this morning that change is an inevitable aspect of our lives. Years ago, the philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus said, *you can never step into the same river twice*. And someone else said, *change is inevitable except in vending machines*.

Despite the inevitability of change, we never seem to really get used to it. Most often we look at change as an enemy rather than a friend. We resist change. We resist change because it makes us feel uncomfortable; it introduces new dynamics into our lives which *force us to think* and to take action. We naturally resist change because it rocks our sense of security. It makes us feel like we are no longer in control. And often the older we grow the more difficult it is to deal with change. Change takes thought, conversation and energy. Change is painful. It causes stress in our lives. Even the smallest changes can be exhausting

I've noticed that change is especially difficult in the church. And this is ironic considering the fact that we are called to be agents of change in people's lives. It is said that the seven last words of a dying church are: *we never did it this way before*. If a church is going to appeal to a younger generation, it has to be willing to adapt to new ways of thinking and doing things. We all know of religious communities that are known for their unwillingness make adjustments and become little closed societies of their own. When that happens, we call it religion – a state in which people are preoccupied with different *forms* of tradition and legalities rather than with God Himself.

I suppose this happens because we develop convictions which we feel are based upon an unchanging God and His holy Word. I had a good deal of this in my own family background. One of my mother's favourite expressions, even in recent years, has been *Stand firm!* It is true that there are principles and convictions that should never be compromised: the nature of God, the fact of His creation, and the reality of man's sin. We should never lose sight of the Gospel concerning Jesus Christ, the importance of the church and God's plan for the end of the world. But too often, I think my aging mother was thinking more about certain practices instead of these principles. It's true that we should not compromise on commitment to an unchanging God and His Word. But that's not the same as commitment to practices in the end which may be more human than godly. Too

often people confuse biblical conviction with their own human traditions. And this is also very common within churches just like ours. It's one of the reasons we have so many different denominations within the larger church. Sometimes Christians develop traditions that may have had a place at one time but are no longer as important or practical as they used to be. This can apply to many things – including dress styles, worship styles, and ministry styles. Sometimes there is a conflict between people over these things. One group wants change for biblical reasons and another resists the change for the same reason. New denominations form out of this kind of thing.

That is how the Christian and Missionary Alliance got started. A young man named, Albert Simpson was willing to challenge the conventional thinking of a church in New York City where people had become comfortable with their traditions. To Simpson, the Gospel was something dynamic that had come to change people's lives dramatically. So he took the Gospel to the streets of that city and before long Italian immigrants were coming to Christ and wanted to participate in the life of the church. But the church wasn't ready to receive them. So Simpson left the church and started Sunday afternoon services for an "alliance of like-minded people" from a variety of denominations. These people loved the message that Jesus was sufficient for every need and should be proclaimed to all.

So I think one of the issues with which we as believers in Christ have to be willing to wrestle is this difference between that which is absolutely non-negotiable and that which is simply a form for a particular place and time. We need to distinguish between true biblical principle and mere cultural practice. At our District Conference there is going to be a discussion about the ordination of women.

Sometimes, I think, God allows change to take place in order for us to come back to the things that are really important. And in that sense we should see change as something that can really be our friend. Rather than resisting change as it occurs in our lives we should see that God can use it to move us to new levels of faith and productivity in what is really important.

As you look at the Bible one of the things that jumps out rather quickly is the means by which God brought change into people's lives to affect His larger purposes. So, for example, in Genesis we read how Joseph, because of the envy of his brothers, is carried off to Egypt. What a terrible event for that family. But there in Egypt he becomes second in command of the land and is used by God to help to his family who came to buy grain during the famine back in Canaan. Still later, after the death of Joseph, God allowed a new ruler to emerge in Egypt who brought

the children of Israel under hard labour. But God used that experience to raise up Moses to become the means by which they could leave Egypt and head back to the Land of Promise. You'll remember how the people complained bitterly about the changes that Moses was introducing, but God was using Him for a much larger purpose. The Bible is full of examples like this.

The biggest change of all was introduced by the coming of Jesus. Even though there were many prophecies concerning Jesus in the Old Testament Scriptures, his own people didn't recognize him when he came. In Luke 4 we read that after Jesus preached in the synagogue of his home town, they tried to push Jesus over a cliff because of the kinds of applications he made to their lives. He rebuked them for their unbelief. And not long after He developed a reputation for hanging out with tax-collectors and sinners – the marginalized and derelicts of his day. He even thrashed grain and healed on the Sabbath all the while maintaining that he wasn't doing anything contrary to God's law. What do you do with a man who obviously thought very highly of the Old Testament Scriptures and yet seemed to challenge some of the ideas and practices commonly held by the people who said they believed the Bible?

When Jesus came it didn't take long to see that though He was obviously a Rabbi, a great teacher, He didn't fit with what they were used to. And his coming produced no small stir. He was an agent of change – such radical change that it brought conflict between people. In the end He spoke of the New Testament in his own blood, as opposed to the Old Testament of the law with its sacrifices and demands. In His own words (as seen in Luke 5:33 or Mark 2:18) He said it was like trying to sew a new patch on an old garment, or like putting new wine in old wine skins that had lost their elastic quality.

So change did not come easily to the religious Jews of Jesus' day. And it also didn't come easily in Paul's time as he tried to explain the Gospel to the Jews. Many mocked his message of saving grace through the cross of Christ. And so we should recognize that it's not always likely that change will come easily for us as well.

Change, and how to handle it, has become a matter of more interest in recent years. I myself have found it helpful to think about the nature of how we process change. Someone has tried to illustrate how change works by outlining the process in a diagram (Virginia Satir).



1. **Status Quo** -- Things are going along just fine.
2. **A Destabilizing Event** -- suddenly something happens to up-set everything – there is a death, you lose your job, someone does something bad, there is an accident, a disaster, a loss of one kind or another.
3. **The Valley of Chaos.** At first we're inclined to resist the changes that occur. And soon we experience all kinds of negative emotions – denial, anger, depression – sort of like the stages of grief.
4. **Transformational Opportunity** – But suddenly we may see that this change might result in a what is called a transformational opportunity. This happens when there is acceptance and resignation. Yielding sets the stage for new beginnings, new growth, and new possibilities.
5. **Adopting new ways of thinking and learning.** You develop a mind-set that enables you to make the most out of your experience. Perhaps you set yourself to study and pray more deeply, to think differently, and to make new decisions to move you forward.
6. **A Whole New Accomplishment** – Reaching higher and further than you were before because of the changes that have taken place in you.

As I conclude today, let me hi-light a couple of ways in which I believe God would want us embrace change:

1. One is in relation to how to handle the changes that come into our own personal lives. And here I am thinking especially about things that happen to us over which we have no control. We may be going along just fine when suddenly something happens that throws us for a loop. How we respond to these experiences can make a big difference in our lives. In the first place we should look at it from God's perspective. Because we believe our lives are in His

hands we should ask why it is that God is seeking to get our attention. Did this change occur because of sin, or simply because God wants me to trust Him in some new way?

Let God examine your own heart. Confess sin. Maybe God has allowed something because He wants to take you deeper and make your life more useful. Try to see how God might be using this thing to help you learn and grow.

2. I believe these principles also apply to churches. There are times when God allows certain things to happen in a body because of sinful attitudes. Yet maybe that's not the case. Perhaps God simply wants to take the church deeper. Regardless; the issue is to go deeper in trusting God and following Him. There is a time to acknowledge what's happened, to think about it, and then to move on. Instead of lamenting the losses, there comes a time to move on, to embrace the change and to make the most of it.
3. But there is another way to embrace change. Just as God is a change agent, so He has called Christians and the church to be agents of change. We should be careful never to compromise on those things that never change – The Word of God and His Gospel. But we need to constantly be on the look-out for how to adapt that message to an ever-changing world. This is not easy. So often our tendency is to merely copy what other Christians are doing. In the end every church is responsible to come to its own conclusions about how to make changes in order to affect change for good in the lives of people. So it is that this church, under good pastoral leadership, needs to come to terms with how to most effectively reach out to this community with the Gospel – in its Sunday services, in its fellowship, and in its many ministries.

So the question is how is change happening in your life and how are you responding to it? What about in the life of the church? And how is the church going to manage change in order to be more effective in making the Gospel known to a new generation?

