

The Christian and Change

By Orville Boyd Jenkins

This address was originally presented in 1969

In my Educational Psychology class for my BA degree, one principle that Dr. Witherspoon continued to emphasize was that *people resist change*.

- The student resists a teacher's efforts to make him learn the required material.
- Many people learn an emotional prejudice against certain other people and some refuse to be swayed at all.
- Popular traditional ideas about learning are challenged and people are alarmed when scientific studies of learning indicates that students do better when they don't get grades on school work.
- A man is a member of a certain political body because that is the party his dad was a member of and he fails or refuses to admit deficiencies or weaknesses in the party.

Ah, Nostalgia!

In religious matters, people also *resist change*. They like what they are comfortable with.

- We know that the new preacher is wrong because we never heard anybody say that before.
- We cannot afford to change our religious beliefs because they are what our church teaches, and since the church teaches it, these beliefs must be right.
- Some people are alarmed and dissatisfied with the new music director because he has been using a guitar in church as we've never had a guitar in church before.
- Meanwhile in another growing church on the outskirts of town, some of the older people miss the guitar and the country style gospel singing because that is in their memories of the church as it used to be.
- And some who like the guitar with country gospel songs feel that the folk style music in the church is sacrilegious.

Human beings are nostalgic people. We're creatures of habit. Change in our behavior and belief is hard to bring about sometimes, even when we want to. But change does and will occur and I'd like to think about a Christian and his attitude toward change.

A Religion of Change

Christianity, I believe, could be called a religion of change – in some aspects of its history. For about two centuries, Christianity was a developing religion, more a movement than an organized religion. But orthodoxy began to develop and from the 300s some councils began deciding what beliefs about Christ and about God would be considered "Christian."

Christianity was originally a Hebrew religion – Jesus and his apostles were Hebrews, or more specifically, they were Jews. And while Jesus ministered to non-Jewish people, the most of his converts and those of the early church were Jews. So Jesus talked about God and his kingdom in terms of the Jewish religion and the early church saw Jesus as the crown of God's revelation to Israel.

When dissension became so great that the Christians were no longer accepted in the Jewish community, the church began to grow in the Greek areas. The Jewish Christians had to try to explain the religion about Jesus to Greeks whose religious sensibilities favoured gods tailored for each situation, condition or need; nature oracles, fertility cults and mystery cults, as well as the more reflective philosophies.

To do this they had to use the terms of philosophy to explain Christianity. Jewish interpreters had already been doing this for over two centuries.

Worldview Shift

Thus early Christianity itself shifted gradually from a religion of Hebrew worldview thought to a religion of Greek philosophy. What came to be called theology is actually philosophy of religion. *Doctrines*, in the sense that most of us know the word, are actually primarily Greek philosophical interpretations of our basically Hebrew religion.

Hebrews were more concerned with practical and the intention behind the practice, not abstract statements. We see this in the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels.

All through the history of the church, theology has searched for the best way to express the teaching of Jesus and the meaning of his death and the salvation of humanity. The doctrines of Christianity have changed from time to time and varied from place to place.

As a university student, I found myself in a cultural setting where many feared education or were suspicious of it. When the young preacher goes off to school the old deacon gathers him up with an arm around his shoulder and says, "Don't let 'em take away your faith at the seminary." He feels somehow that to *change beliefs* is to *give up our faith*.

The Bible's Challenge

They were afraid of a worldview shift. But Christian faith is about making changes. The Bible always challenges our worldview.

Though Christianity has in fact included all different types of beliefs, we tend to look upon *what our church teaches* as what true Christianity has *always* believed. Our understanding of the scriptures is always colored by the philosophies (formal or informal) which we learn and the dominant view of the society we live in.

And yet, it is hard to give up what we have learned emotionally. Religion is even used to back up our prejudices and our previous beliefs. This makes the problem of change doubly hard. For instance, it creates a problem for some people when they come to realize that there are two accounts of creation. If you focus on their details, they don't match.

A Picturesque Beginning

We read in the first chapter of Genesis an account of creation that tells us everything was created in the first five days of creation except humans, and they were created on the sixth day. The key word here is *humanity* (*adam* in Hebrew). The story tells us God created humanity male and female – all at once.

Then we turn the page to Genesis 2 and see that the *man* (*ish* in Hebrew) was the first living thing created and

that God, in seeking a helpmate for the man (the male human), created all the animals and birds and fish. But since the man still lonely and blue, he finally created a *woman* (the female human) (*isha* in Hebrew) for him and this satisfied man and God.

The key words in the second story are the complementary *man* and *woman*: *ish* and *isha*, who then become one in the plan of God. As the Bible itself speaks on its own terms, these very different stories both *make the same point* of God's benevolent plan of *unity*.

We see a New Testament statement of this plan in Ephesians, which refers to God's creation of the One New Humanity in Christ.

Moderns have the idea the Bible should read like a modern history or science book. They fail to see the unity in these stories, because they are written in a different worldview. If you impose a rule upon these biblical texts that they must be seen as **historical** accounts, then they become incompatible. That obviously is not the focus in the stories.

Some people's belief about the Bible is endangered and they may tend to reject the Bible revelation as totally no good or may react and become over-defensive against any new learning, even when the discovery comes from *reading the Bible itself*.

Faith Writings

The Bible is literally a collection of **confessions of faith** written in a *narrative form*, interpreting the events of history from the point of view that there was one God over all creation. This provides a cosmic unity to all creation.

This declaration of faith in Genesis 1 and 2 carries this historical drama to cosmic dimensions – the covenant of God for the Hebrews did not begin with Abraham, but it began in the very being of the universe. A covenant of cosmic dimensions and the Hebrew was part of it!

This is the faith of the Old Testament (or in Jewish terms, the *Tanakh*). When we can see that the narratives and legends, or songs and prophecies are not mere history, and not at all science, but they are *faith* – the Old Testament comes alive. The people become real. We feel and experience the faith the Hebrew had as a primitive person in a pagan world, who yet had come to believe that there was purpose in the chaos of history. The Hebrews perceived that Yahweh their God was in charge.

Faith Ways

This is a dynamic and real faith, one much like we need. Yet we don't have it, perhaps because we are too afraid to venture and explore beyond the folk religion concepts many of us have inherited. In reading the Bible to see what it actually said, we discovered that the common folk religion around us developed without any awareness of the historical and cultural phenomena that make up the background of the Old Testament scriptures.

We find that the New Testament is a vivid dynamic expression of **faith renewed** in relation to Jesus Christ and an interpretation of the meaning of his life and teachings in relation to the redemption of history and all humanity. But to us, many times it is merely a historical narrative, just some selected texts out of history, because we are afraid to venture beyond the security of our childhood conception of God. We fear the change in our ideas and attitude. But the Bible is all about change. Faith changes things!

Christian Faith – a Living Faith

The Christian Faith is an existential faith – a faith to be lived. Christian faith (as opposed to the Christian *religion*), in order to be real, must be experienced and practical in real life, not just held intellectually. And this meaning of faith includes the use of "faith" both as the personal trust **or** beliefs of *an individual and* as the Christian faith, or *religion*.

Many Christian leaders have been active in movements of social reform for religious reasons – because they felt that the promise of the kingdom of God meant freedom, happiness and better life, because of Christ's message of a life eternal in quality and a resurrection to be experienced now by those who believe the gospel. John 5:25.

The Kingdom Life

Jewish people have always been proponents of social justice and political reform, perhaps immediately or directly because they have been victims of so much injustice and prejudice. But this perspective arises also because of the belief that God's will for righteousness and justice involves the whole of society. Both the Christian and Jewish faiths find their basis for social concern in the Prophets of the Old Testament (or *Tanakh*). Amos for instance, in 1:6-8 and 4:1-2.

Inherent in the Hebrew-Christian tradition found in the Old Testament is reform and change in search of the ideal. Jesus put it this way in the Model Prayer: "May your kingdom come *on earth* as it is in heaven." And in every generation, there has been at least one great leader of reform and change in areas of religious thought and life. Even in the late Middle Ages, when a religio-political power structure held such horrid sway over the lives and minds of men, there occurred a work of theological and practical *reinterpretation* of the Christian message.

Solid Ground

While Christianity involves principles of freedom and independence that entail change of various kinds at the necessary times in history or in one's life, there is a **permanency** to our faith. There is a vibrant and powerful quality of the permanence, self-transcendence and stability in the Christian experience, in the Christian commitment that is more basic than the problems and challenges we encounter in change. This is the faith that anchors us.

Faith in Christ provides a ground upon which a person may stand while debating some doctrine within himself. He can feel secure in that he is free to investigate, that no matter what he comes to see as the truth intellectually, or as the best doctrine theologically, he has a faith which can stand by him if he sees a need to change his belief.

Faith is Fundamental

Faith, in other words, is more fundamental than beliefs. God is more fundamental than human intellect. Faith in God is more fundamental than faith in ideas and mental formulations.

We can feel free to face the changes of Christianity or culture. We are free in faith to face our growing understanding of the world. We can even welcome change in attitude, belief and whatever, because we trust that **the One** in whom we are trusting can sustain us, whatever our understanding of that faith.

Doubt is not the same thing as unbelief. Doubt can be the courage that launches out where understanding is insufficient, where faith in God is enough! "Faith drives out all fear!"

We can have faith even if we don't have a solution to every question. To focus this point, I close with a song I wrote and performed with my band, *The New Light*. In the original presentation, I presented the

original version of the song, written that year. I rewrote the song in 2001 and present that version here to close my topic.

"Age of Worry"*

by Orville Boyd Jenkins, 1969, 2001

We're living in an age of worry, Living in a time of stress.

Disappointments all around us, So many can't find happiness.

We're living in an age of worry, With troubles rampant o'er the earth.

We try to find in life a purpose, But sometimes wonder what it's worth.

Sometimes we'd like to find a shelter, But a helping hand is hard to see.

And when the challenges are hounding, We just don't have the energy.

We're living in an age of danger, We need someone to calm our fears

With all the turmoil and the struggles, We need someone to stop our tears.

Faith in God will overcome it, and we will have eternal life.

Faith won't take away our troubles, But we can live above the strife.

We're living in an age of worry, but there's a purpose we can see.

If we will follow Christ the Saviour, he then will set our spirits free.

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*Recorded in 1970 by *The New Light*, on the album *New Light for a New Day*.

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