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The **challenge** of **change**

Why can't women join the clergy? That was the question on the floor of a General Synod of the Church of England in the 1980s. Back then, it was a controversial proposition—and hotly debated. One speaker spoke with passion against women being admitted to the priesthood.

"In this matter," he said, "as in so much else in our great country, why can't the status quo be the way forward?"[1]

Status quo? What he didn't realize was that the status quo (the existing condition) had already been shaken by merely asking the question about women in ministry. Whenever a denomination has seriously tackled this question, they have tended to break the status quo by broadening the role of women in their churches, even if the decision was ultimately against women becoming full-fledged clergy.

Status quo? You'd have to ask your great-great-grandmother what it was like to live in an era when change was the exception, and when change happened, it came slowly. The past century has brought an accelerating rush of change within society that has impacted the church as well.

The status quo can no longer be, well, the status quo. Change now comes upon us so quickly that there's barely enough time for us to understand *what is the status,* let alone time for it to become *quoed*!

The problem of change

I grew up Adventist at a time when you knew what made an Adventist. It was obvious (or at least it seemed that way to me). The common beliefs, lifestyle, and Sabbath keeping gave us clear definition. In a sense, it was easy to be Adventist then. The instructions were clear. You were expected to act in a certain way. You worshiped in a certain way, with worship outlines supplied from above (no, not from God), and you simply filled in the blanks about who was to do what. And guidelines for Sabbath keeping were well defined.

Not that we weren't interested in making changes. During my teenage years, in the 1960s, some were suggesting that instruments other than organ and piano—with the occasional brass band—could be used in worship. Guitars were beginning to come into our church, but what was obvious to us teenagers about their acceptability was not obvious to all. The amount of midnight oil burned in church boards discussing the issue would have supplied a myriad of maidens with oil for their lamps while awaiting the bridegroom.

Just as it dawned on Dorothy in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, when she said to her dog, "I've a feeling we're not in Kansas any more," anyone who grew up Adventist back then can say, "I have a feeling that we're no longer in the church of that time anymore." Better yet, ask someone who left the church and came back 20 or 30 years later. Some of them search for the church of yesterday and find it no longer there.

Outside the church, change has become commonplace. Some 50 years ago, change was expected and welcomed because members thought that change would be more of the same, only better. Now there are no guarantees. We "cannot predict with confidence what will be happening in our own lives. Change is now more chancy, but also more exciting, if we want to see it that way."[2]

Most people don't want change. "Given the choice between changing and proving that change is not necessary, most people will get busy on the proof," says economist Kenneth Galbraith.[3]

There's good reason for this attitude. Change often means ambiguity, confusion, or loss of control; that's why there's resistance.[4] This may mean "sacrificing the familiar, even if it is unpleasant, for the unknown, even when it might be better. Better the hole they know rather than the one not yet dug."[5]

Change has always been a constant, but more recently, an ever-quickening rate of change has come upon us. This is not a disease, even if it does cause some "dis-ease."[6] It's part of living in a "world where only one rule exists—the certainty of uncertainty."[7]

Within Christianity, we find a history of change. Jesus established the church, but the church began as a Jewish movement. Within a generation, the church was mainly a Gentile movement and an inclusive organization. The apostle Paul, by championing the view that circumcision was not necessary among Gentiles, was accused of going against the explicit command of Scripture.[8] Jews and Gentiles were welcome, as were women, children, and slaves. All were treated equally. Wherever Christianity established a

presence, there were usually differences in its form and shape, which could cause conflict between other Christians. Sadly, "the resulting differences often erupted in conflict."[9] More change.

The Reformation changed the face of Christianity and the world. These were dramatic times. Complex times. Historians are no longer as certain of reasons for the Reformation as they once were, but the change is well noted in the question: "Why did people around 1515 want to see the Body of Christ in the Eucharist, but around 1525 demand to hear the Word of God?"[10]

The Adventist Church was a child of the Reformation when formed about 350 years later. This change, we believe, helped bring back truths that were lost over time. Now, however, changing times and changes within the church have led to uncertainty about who and what we are—not in every detail, but in some significant areas.

What about the unchanging God?

When working as an editor, I used to receive letters bemoaning changes in the church that were referred to in our magazines. The topics would cover a whole range of issues, including the role of women, worship styles, and Bible translations. If enough letters came in on these topics, you could almost guarantee someone would eventually quote Malachi 3:6, " 'I am the LORD, and I do not change' " (NLT).

Sometimes the resistance to change fitted their argument, sometimes not. Sometimes it brought a chuckle, sometimes sadness. Sometimes it caused me to question the writer's thought processes. Sometimes I'd agree.

Not once, though, do I remember anyone quoting the whole verse: " 'I am the LORD, and I do not change. That is why you descendants of Jacob are not already destroyed' " (NLT). "You should be surprised that you aren't destroyed," God continues, "because since the days of your ancestors, you have scorned My laws, and you have not obeyed Me."

Why haven't they been destroyed? We find the answer at the beginning of Malachi, for this little book begins with a love note: " 'I have always loved you,' says the LORD."

" 'Really? How have you loved us?' " comes the question.

" 'This is how I showed my love for you: I loved your ancestor Jacob' " (Mal. 1:2, NLT).

God's love is the constant. God's love never changes. That's why His creation hasn't been destroyed. That's why He gave us His Son. That's why we have the right to be called His children (John 1:12).

Malachi 3:6 forms part of God's plea for His people to return to Him. They claim not to have turned away, but God reminds them of their shortcomings. Some, "those who feared the LORD" (verse 16, NLT), listen and respond. God calls them His " 'special treasure' " and says that He will spare them as a father spares an " 'obedient child' " (verse 17, NLT).

God's love is the constant. That's what's needed—not an unchanging society or an unchanging religious system. Their religious system was temporary until the arrival of Jesus. Then it changed. Dramatically.

From the beginning, God's love has been the constant. During times of change, we must be sure that we do not stand against any change merely on the mistaken belief that God never changes. His love never changes, even as His church does change.

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The necessity of change

Some things must never change within Christianity. The core truths are solid. God loves. Jesus saves. Salvation comes through faith alone. We're commanded to love and commissioned to share—to live and act as children of light. Teachings such as the Sabbath, what happens when we die, and the Second Coming don't change, even if our understanding of them deepens.

Change should lead to growth and development. There needs to be a sense of continuity from where we were to where we are, and from

where we are to where we are going. A tree is alive and bears fruit because it maintains contact with its roots, writes Jack Provonsha. He adds that we stand on the shoulders of our fathers and mothers in the Adventist Church, but we show them the greatest disrespect if we don't move a millimeter beyond where they stood.[11]

Some things must change. To put it bluntly: "If a congregation is a living organism . . . it follows that change is necessary. Organisms that do not change and grow are not living organizations—they're dead!"[12]

There's nothing new in this notion. When Paul preached in Athens, he used the language of the philosophers and quoted their poets. He went from Athens to Corinth and changed his approach, choosing to preach the simple message of the Cross. Commentators are unsure as to why he did this but probably there was a change in methodology. Had he learned something from his experience, or did he change according to the cultural differences?

Former president of the world church of Seventh-day Adventists, Neal Wilson, notes Adventist historian George Knight's claim that most Adventist founders and pioneers would be reluctant to join the church if they had to agree to the church's fundamental beliefs of today. He then adds, "Adventism keeps searching, investigating, listening, reviewing, studying, and praying with the conviction that God may enlighten and enlarge its understanding of the salvation story."[13]

Change is rarely sought; indeed, it's often opposed. When the image of the church is viewed as a haven where peace prevails, we don't want change. That's when relatively innocuous changes—a new hymnal, the use of gender-inclusive language, for instance—disturb the stability. "Worshipers may not want cultural changes even mentioned in the context of the service, since they have come to escape such realities." The problem is that "denial of change often only prolongs its pain, and in the church's case delays its ministry to a new culture."[14]

"The church cannot refuse to change, since it is in the process of discovery. . . . The church cannot change willy-nilly with the currents of culture, because it knows it follows God's Spirit. But for the same reason neither can it resist all change. We are left with an openness to change, a willingness to weigh the possibility that change is one of the progressive discoveries of our life as a church."[15]

Here, then, is the tension. The church must be in a continual readiness to change in order to remain in touch with its society and to remain true to its mission. At the same time, its mission and its purpose is based on eternal truths and unchangeable principles. Added tension exists in congregations and denominations when the boundaries between these inviolable truths and principles and the contingent are poorly defined.

We do know that, until the Second Coming, God's church can always do better, can always improve, and can always minister more meaningfully. This alone should make us alert to ways that will make us more effective. Asking what's effective, within the boundaries of truths and principles, also takes the emphasis away from ourselves and whatever our personal preferences may be and allows us to focus on fulfilling our purpose. Fulfilling our purpose is what should drive the church and change within the church.

We live in a culture of fast-paced change, a culture that embraces change. We can't stand apart from culture because we're a part of that culture. Of necessity, we present Christianity and speak our faith within the context of a certain language, modes of thought, and symbolism. We do so within the context of our culture.[16]

Change brings challenge. Change brings uncertainty. Change brings tension. But if we don't change, a worse fate awaits us: we remain the same.

God forbid!

1 Charles Handy, *The Age of Unreason* (Watertown, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1998), 3.
2 Ibid., 6, 7.
3 Quoted in Vicki Bennett and Ian Mathieson, *The Effective Leader* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2002), 103.
4 Todd D. Jick, *Managing Change: Cases and Concepts* (Boston: Irwin McGraw-Hill, 1993), 6.
5 Handy, 28.
6 Sean Fagan, *Does Morality Change?* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2003), 7.
7 Rebecca Huntley, *The World According to Y* (Australia: Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2006), 15.
8 William Loader, *Jesus and the Fundamentalism of His Day: The Gospels, the Bible and Jesus* (Melbourne: Uniting Education, 1997), 7.
9 Marshall D. Johnson, *The Evolution of Christianity* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), xix.
10 Peter Blickle, quoted in R. N. Swanson, "The Pre-Reformation Church," in *The Reformation World,* ed. Andrew Pettegree (London: Routledge, 2006), 9.
11 Jack W. Provonsha, *A Remnant in Crisis* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1993), 21.
12 Kathleen S. Smith, *Stilling the Storm* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 91.
13 Neal C. Wilson, "A Word to the Reader," in *A Search for Identity,* George R. Knight (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2000), 7, 8.
14 Robert Kysar, *Stumbling in the Light* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999), 37, 24.
15 Ibid., 65.
16 Ibid., 22.



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